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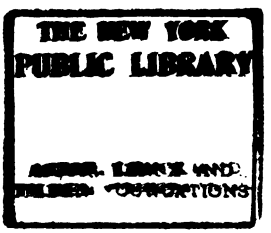
FLORENCE IRWIN

THE MASK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FRONTISPIECE. *See page 202.*

THE MASK

A NOVEL

BY

FLORENCE IRWIN

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
PAUL STAHR

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
1917

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CHAPTER I

THE postman turned in at the rectory gate and blew his whistle. This was his afternoon round; he was tired, and his legs ached. The thought crossed his mind that "some folks were lucky." Imagine living in a beautiful big gray-stone house, with ample lawns and salvia-bordered walks, and just loafing around all day. Nothing to do but preach a twenty-minute sermon each Sunday and go to church two or three times a week. And the church right next door, at that!

An ample and comfortable-looking black-clad maid responded to the whistle of the envious postman. Not even here was there balm in Gilead, for the maid was neither young nor pretty, and she and the postman had known each other for years.

"Not much to-day," said the man, producing a solitary missive.

"How's your cold?" asked the maid, as a matter of politeness.

"Oh, I'm draggin' around. Us poor folks has to. Think I'd like a preacher's job for awhile."

"About one day you'd like it, if that. Much you know about such jobs," said the maid scathingly, and shut the door in his face.

She laid the letter on a little silver tray, and took it to her master's study. Here she knocked lightly.

"Come in," said the Reverend Mr. Terry. He took the letter with a pleasant word to its bearer.

"Do you want your tea, sir?" asked the woman, lingering.

"I don't know. I'm rather busy. Is your mistress back yet?"

"No, sir, she isn't. But don't you think a cup of tea would rest you?"

"Well, yes. Perhaps it would; you may bring it in here to me. Just tea and a bit of thin toast. Nothing else. You take good care of me, don't you, Ellen?"

The middle-aged Ellen beamed with pleasure as she departed on her errand. The entire Terry family was adored and adopted by its two servants whose pride in the household gave rise to much bragging.

"Though, of course," Ellen would always observe at the end of any discussion, "a one-eyed man could see the difference between our family and the rest of the people in this town."

"Ours is *real* swells," Delia would agree. "Whenever one of them young ladies as is friends of Miss Elsa, an' Miss Alison, an' Miss Gertrude, stops at this front door an' says, 'Tell the young ladies, please, that I hope to see them at four o'clock tea,' I jest have to laff to myself. I always want to say, 'Oh, you've decided to copy my young ladies, have you? You know they have their tea as reg'lar as their breakfast or their luncheon.'"

"Well," Ellen would observe sententiously, "I've always heard my mother say, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,'—though who'd ever want to try to, passes me. But this I do know: I've lived in this house fifteen year, come April, an' you a bit longer, Delia, an' if there's another such family to be found, I'd like to see 'em."

"Me too, Ellen," Delia, the cook, would chime in.

To-day, when Ellen carried the tea tray back to the study, she found her master strangely perturbed. The letter she had brought was lying open on the desk before him.

"Is Miss Alison in, Ellen?" he asked.

"No, sir. None of the young ladies is in. Miss Alison, I think, went to take charge of the Mothers' Club, because Mrs. Terry had to go to the lunch party at Mrs. Russell's."

"Well, let me know the moment that Mrs. Terry returns: or Miss Alison either. That is all, thank you, Ellen. Everything looks very nice."

Down at the Mothers' Club, too, tea was being served, but things were much noisier there. Fat Mrs. Mengle managed to keep her resonant tones above the general din.

"Laff? Say, I nearly died laffin'. This here little Dago an' his ma was settin' right next Joey an' me in the trolley. I'd took Joey over to see his gran'ma as is dyin', by all they say. An' this young Dago was coughin' fit to bust hisself with whoopin'-cough, an' a suckin' one of them all-day suckers like you see in the shops. Cough an' suck, suck an' cough, was about the way it was goin'. An' before

you could say Jack Robinson, hadn't that there Joey of mine reached over as slick as a weasel, and snitched that sucker out'en the Dago's hand, an' stuck it in 'is own mouth, with the Dago kid yellin' bloody murder? Say, honest, I laffed till I thought I'd bust."

At this moment, Alison Terry reëntered the room from the kitchenette where she had been helping serve the cocoa and cake which formed the repast dignified by the name of "tea."

"What is the joke, Mrs. Mengle?" she asked, with ready sympathy, and the story was immediately repeated for her benefit.

"Oh, but Mrs. Mengle," she cried in horror, "you mustn't let Joey do such things. He'll catch all sorts of diseases."

"Him? Lord, no, Miss Alison. He ain't never sick. He's kinda thin an' pulin'-lookin'— gets that from his father. But he ain't never bin what you might call *down*-sick in his life."

Alison thought of the white rat-faced Joey, and shuddered. Such things as these formed the great problems of her daily life, and she took them with intense seriousness. She began to talk, very sweetly and winningly, about germs. But her audience was unresponsive.

"Germs?" scoffed Mrs. Mengle, "I don't take no stock in 'em. Who's ever saw one, I want to ast? I think the more you bother about sech things, the more likely you are to ketch 'em. Worry and fussin' kills more folks than germs does, I allus say."

"The way I look at it, is this," broke in Mrs.

McConnor. "If you're goin' to be sick, sick is what you'll be, fuss as you may. An' if you ain't goin' to be sick, you jest spoil your life a-worryin'. Of course, Miss Alison, you're young, an' you ain't never raised a family. It's natchrel you'd feel as you do."

Alison thought helplessly of Mrs. McConnor's family. Seven dead children and three living ones were what report gave her. And here she was, absolutely satisfied with the results of her "raising." Poor Alison! She decided that it was a case to be handed over to her mother and father. She was constantly running up against the draw-backs of her youth.

The function was over, and the women all began to put on their wraps. Joey Mengle, thin and weazened, appeared upon the scene to get the rake-off of cake that his mother always "slipped" him. Alison called him to her and tried to catch his interest, but she found him apathetic and elusive. He didn't like "old wimmin's meetin's" except for the comfort they brought to his ever-empty inner man.

"No, ma'am, Miss Alison," he replied. "I don't know ez I'll be back to Sunday school next week. I'm kinda busy, now."

"You know, Joey, it is only about ten weeks until Christmas," she reminded him. "And they have decided that there will be no presents on the tree for pupils that come in at the last moment."

She was conscious of the unworthiness of her method and troubled by the consciousness. But she knew intuitively that it was the only way to catch Joey. He looked up at once.

"I been goin' to the Metherdist," he informed her. "Thought mebbe I'd go there a wile an' then here a wile. Get a kinda change."

"Just as you like," returned Alison coldly. She plainly saw his plan of campaign. Two gifts and a double amount of candy formed his objective point. Then suddenly, she reminded herself of the drabness of his life, and the impossibility of his acquiring very high ethical standards at home.

"Come back to me as soon as you can, Joey," she said, flashing him a smile. "I'm going to tell the boys some very interesting stories and give them each a picture-card every Sunday that they are there. And, when you have ten cards, you get a star to keep."

Suddenly she stopped. Here she was buying him again. Was it right, or not? She wished she knew. It was certainly the only way to get him and many another like him. But how much good resulted from such getting?

As she turned away to put on her own wraps, she was the subject of much whispered admiration.

"Ain't she pretty? So stylish an' tall. Miss Gertrude's even prettier, o' course, but still she ain't got Miss Alison's ways about her. Ain't it funny, Miss Elsa's th' oldest an' her so much littler'n th' other two? Say, ain't that a stylish hat Miss Alison's got on?"

Suddenly they noticed the mourning-band on the sleeve of her long light coat. And, at the same moment, it struck them that her "stylish" hat was all black and very plain.

"I wonder who's dead?" they whispered. "You ast her. No, you. I don't hardly like to. Might make her feel bad."

Mrs. Mengle, however, was not troubled with reserve. Her curiosity was never left unsatisfied if bold questions could elicit answers.

"Who's dead, Miss Alison?" she asked without preamble, pointing to the black sleeve-band.

"My godmother," answered the girl. "I never knew her very well, but she was a dear friend of my mother's. They were almost like sisters in their girlhood, and my mother named me for her friend."

"That's the way you got your queer name then? An' that's how it come you ain't named fer a saint? I allus heard tell how Miss Elsa was named fer St. Elizabeth."

"And for my mother," said Alison.

"An' Miss Gertrude fer St. Gertrude, because she wus born on the feast day. An' I allus wondered how you, comin' between 'em, happened to be named that heathenish way. An' now I know."

"Yes, now you know," smiled Alison. "Goodbye, every one. You'll all be here next week, I hope." And out she went into the darkening October day.

The air smelled sweet and fresh, and she inhaled it in deep breaths. It carried the tang of frost and the smell of burning leaves. Yellow maple leaves floated softly from branch to ground, and brown ones lay piled in gutters. They rattled like dry paper in the light breeze. The wide lawns that surrounded all the houses were bright with scarlet salvia and hardy chrysanthemums, both white and

gold. Their pungent odor was wafted to the girl's nostrils.

She walked along the familiar streets with unseeing eyes, busy with the problems of what seemed to her a very full and rushing life. Although Alison Terry was unusually serious and conscientious for her years, she brimmed with the joy of youth and of a health that was absolutely magnificent. And above all else, the girl was interested — interested in everything. Her quick mind jumped to meet each new issue with marvellous eagerness.

She actually never had time to think much about herself, because of the special quality of her mentality. There was always something so much more enthralling to think about.

Just now, she was worrying quite a bit about Joey Mengle's soul and body. Was it right to bribe the former? If not, how could it be reached? And how could his foolish mother be taught a proper regard for his puny body?

Such questions seemed very vital to the girl who wrestled with them. And perhaps, after all, they were. If "the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skins," why are not you and I blood-relations of Joey Mengle and his ilk?

As Alison walked rapidly along, a poor little half-starved cat ran up and began to rub against her ankles. Instantly, it became the one question of the moment. Stooping, the girl picked up the pitiful waif and cuddled it in her arms, exclaiming in sympathetic horror as she discovered what a miserable bony frame its soft fur covered. With all her up-to-date talk about germs, she never gave them a

thought when any abused animal made appeal to her pity. Such pity was always quickly won by the oppressed and suffering, whether man or beast; and with it invariably came its concomitant — black burning, furious disgust of the oppressor. Alison Terry's sympathy for the under dog was always quick and sure. And her hatred of cruelty was so red-hot, so uncompromising, that Mrs. Terry used often to agonize over what she called "Alison's hardness." As a matter of fact, this "hardness" was the result of a softness so intense that it hurt. The girl was always fighting losing battles, always protecting the weak and forlorn, always beating her head against the stone wall of horror and cruelty. Luckily for her, she had not yet seen much of suffering. Her life, full though it seemed to her, was in reality sheltered and protected to an unusual degree. Not many girls of Alison's avid intelligence are fortunate enough to reach womanhood with as few real jars as had fallen to her lot. Nevertheless, the future waited, and the fact remained that she was excruciatingly open to pain.

Apart from the very special atmosphere of her own home, the town in which she lived presented none of the problems of that rushing life which is coming more and more to invade the world. In Coningsboro, every one had time for everything. Every building in the village might almost have been a temple to the great gods of Quiet and Calm and Peace — those deities whose high priests grow fewer year by year, whose vestal virgins weary of their sheltered life, whose altars and shrines are increasingly desecrated every day, whose sacred fires will

soon be everlastingly extinguished, and whose twilight is fast settling into night.

Although all the inhabitants of Coningsboro considered themselves very busy persons with very full lives, as a matter of fact, no one of them ever hurried, and no very great questions ever presented themselves for solution.

The absence of factories precluded the existence of the labor problems; the absence of foreigners killed all race questions; the town held just two Italian families and one Chinese laundryman. They were familiarly alluded to by Mrs. Mengle and her kind as "the Dagos" and "the Chink." They were always noticeable on the street, and it was an unsolved riddle with whom they consorted in their hours of leisure.

In Coningsboro, there was no great wealth and no great poverty; that is, considering these terms in the meaning which they carry in the rest of the world. Extremely well-to-do citizens, living in distinct comfort in homes on which varying sums of money had been expended, did Coningsboro boast. Also, although she did not boast of them, she had other citizens quite poor enough to accept charity. Varying conditions of life there were, of course, but no extremes. Famine, want, oppression, and horror were unknown. The cleanness of the air and the lack of crowded tenements had, so far, held epidemics at bay. Life flowed, indeed, in very smooth channels in Coningsboro, even though her sons and daughters realized it not.

Still cuddling the now happy and purring cat, Alison turned in at her own gate. Against the

semi-darkness of the autumn evening, the beautiful lines of the big house disclosed and concealed themselves in patches of light and shade. Strangers were always astounded at the beauty of Conings-boro's Episcopal rectory, until they learned its history.

As Alison entered the broad hall, Ellen appeared from the dining-room where she was setting the table for dinner.

"Miss Alison, your father wants you to step into the study before you go up-stairs, please."

"Very well," nodded the girl, and tapped at the study door.

"Come in," called her father's voice, then, after a moment's pause, "My dear Alison, not another strange cat? Really, my child, you cannot keep this up. How many have you already?"

"Well, Father, this makes the fourth. But look at it! It's just a mass of skin and bones; I couldn't leave it to starve, now could I? I'm sure I can find a home for it in a few days. Poor little thing!" she laid her cheek caressingly against the gray fur.

"Well, take it out to Delia, and tell her to feed it. And don't linger, my dear. Come back to me at once. I have something very important to say to you, and it is nearly six o'clock."

"Is Mother home?" asked the girl, reappearing without her protégé.

"Yes. She is in her room. You will want to go to her when I have spoken to you. She is waiting for you there."

Alison threw a quick look at the speaker. She had a presentiment of something unusual.

"What is the matter, Father? Anything?"

"No, my dear. I have some very remarkable news for you, but the sad part of it we know already — the death of your godmother. I have just had a business letter from the executors of her estate. She has left you — on account of your name — an annual income of fifteen hundred dollars."

"Of *what?*" Alison didn't take it in at all.

"Of fifteen hundred dollars. It is a very large amount for a girl of your age, Alison."

"Why, *Father!* Why — How did she happen to leave it to me, instead of to Mother? I hardly knew her. I have never seen her since I was fifteen years old."

"No. She led a very eccentric life; trotting all over the world with a hired companion, in search of health and novel experiences. She had a great deal of money, but she left the bulk of it to a nephew whom she had scarcely seen for years. I believe they once had a violent quarrel, and the aunt vowed she would never speak to him again. And she kept her word but, your mother always believed, at the expense of her happiness. She used to adore this nephew in his boyhood; he was her only living relation. He married against her wishes, which brought about the quarrel. But she has evidently eased her conscience by leaving him everything at her death. Everything, that is, except what she has left in trust for you."

"But why for me?"

"Because of your name, and the fact that you are her goddaughter. Your mother is left a beautiful emerald ring which has not yet arrived."

The girl sat as though stupefied.

"It is very wonderful news, Alison."

"I should think it was. I simply can't grasp it yet. Father, isn't fifteen hundred a year a great deal of money."

"For a girl of your age and for the simple life that we lead, I think it is. Yes, my dear, I certainly think that it is."

"Falling down out of the sky, like that, it surely is. Isn't your — forgive me, Father, for asking, but you know I have heard a good many of the parish reports — isn't your salary only two thousand?"

The Reverend Mr. Terry moved a little uneasily.

"Two thousand and the rectory; yes, it is. But you must know, my dear, that we could hardly live as we do on that. I have some income of my own."

"Oh, I see," cried Alison, without a shade of curiosity as to whether the paternal income were much or little. "I'm awfully glad of it. It made me feel ashamed to think that I, doing nothing at all, should have nearly as much money as you get for all your hard work. And yet — that is still so, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with the case. My good parishioners give me all that they can afford, and we have an exceedingly beautiful home thrown into the bargain. I am enabled to take this salary, to bring up my daughters properly, to meet the constant demands with which a man in my position is confronted, and to live in the place that we all love so well, because I have inherited enough

money to make all this possible. That settles my side of it, and it has nothing whatever to do with your legacy. Generous though it is, it is not a twentieth part of your godmother's income. She was a very rich woman and, I am sure, was glad to leave you what she did. But, I need hardly remind you, Alison, that the possession of money entails responsibility. You must train yourself to be a good steward, my daughter."

"Oh, Father, I want to. And you must help me. I know nothing whatever about money."

"Naturally. Now, my dear, run up to your mother. She is waiting for you in her room."

Mrs. Terry was doing an unusual thing; she was resting on her couch in a softly shaded room with low turned lights and a crackling fire.

She had had a trying day. A luncheon party at the house of a self-conscious, newly-rich, underbred hostess had hit her on the raw. The husband of this hostess — Mr. Alfred Russell, by name — had made a quick fortune in trolley lines and had just been elected president of the company. The only daughter of the house had spent two years in an expensive boarding school, punctuating them with vacation visits to school friends in homes whose glories she was never weary of describing — "estates" was her favorite word. As Coningsboro had a habit of educating her daughters at home, this young lady, Miss Leila Russell, felt particularly distinguished and "traveled." She was now home for her first winter out of school, and her mother was planning a series of elaborate festivities in her honor. A luncheon party to what Mrs. Russell

termed the "older élite of the town" had opened the series. At this function, the hostess had informed her guests apologetically that she was forced to give "one common party just to keep folks from getting mad," but that the rest of her affairs were to touch the heights of elegance.

Mrs. Terry had reached her own home in a state of irritation very unusual to her. Being a clergyman's wife, it was her business to look for the good in every one and to shut her eyes to all else. Being a conscientious woman, she honestly tried to do it, and being instinctively kind, she was loath to criticize those whose bread she had eaten. Nevertheless, there were few things that would have relieved her as much as describing the horrors of that luncheon party to some one whom she loved and trusted. This life-saving process being denied her, she had tried a quiet hour on a comfortable couch, and had found it to work very well indeed.

To her, in this haven, came her second daughter, Alison, fresh from the conversation with her father.

"Mother, are you asleep?" she asked softly.

"No, dear. Just resting and waiting for you. Well, my child, this is wonderful news."

"Isn't it?" said the daughter, stooping to kiss the still fresh cheek of her pretty mother. "Do you know, I can't see why, but I keep feeling ashamed because I didn't know Aunt Alison better and love her more, while she was alive." ("Aunt" was a courtesy title.)

"Yes, I wish that you had. But it was impossible with the strange roving life that she led. Even

her old friends saw nothing of her. She and I used to be like twin sisters; but, for years now, I have heard nothing from her except through her annual letter, each Christmas."

"Well, of course, I always made her something at Christmas. But I wish now I could have done more."

"Alison," said her mother hesitatingly, "I have always felt that, on that one visit that you did make at her house — when you were fifteen — you probably saw some things which struck you strangely. Of course, I should not have wanted you to betray your aunt's hospitality by discussing her unkindly, even with me. That would be impossible. But I was impressed with your silence regarding that visit. And I merely want to say to you now, dear, that Aunt Alison's life abroad probably modified her habits to a very great extent. She lived much in strange countries — Japan, and Egypt, and Capri. And she had acquired ways, I imagine, quite different from those to which you were accustomed."

"Yes, Mother," said the girl. And thus the subject was closed between them. But Alison's mind, try as she might to control it, rushed back to the horror of that visit; she saw cigarette-smoking women, and card games settled by the passing of large sums of money, and Aunt Alison's blonded hair and encarmined lips and she shuddered anew. For a moment she felt as though she would soil her hands by touching her legacy; ought she to refuse it, retain her mental independence, and insist on pouring the whole revolting tale into her mother's ears? Then came the quick reaction, the shame of

her own ingratitude. Probably Mother was right. And certainly Alison's lips were sealed, now above all.

Sweet though she was, good though she was, wise though she was in many ways, beloved though she was by family and friends, the fact still remained that Mrs. Terry was a dodger of real issues. Just as a child, about to tell an untruth, seeks to palliate his sin by saying, "I *think* I did," instead of "I did," so did Mrs. Terry always substitute criticism of generalities for criticism of particularities, criticism of things for criticism of persons. Thus did she manage to form her daughters' standards aright, and yet avoid discomfort with her own conscience. In this practice, she was helped by many things; the quiet of the place in which she lived, the general simplicity of habit therein, the particular pliancy and tractability of her own daughters, their adoration of her, and the peculiar precedence tacitly accorded her husband and herself in the community. There wasn't a woman in Coningsboro who didn't turn intuitively to Mrs. Terry when plunged into a social dilemma; there wasn't one who had ever achieved real intimacy with her; there wasn't one who wasn't on her best behavior in Mrs. Terry's presence; nor one who didn't copy her in many ways; nor, certainly, one who didn't seek to keep her own more ignoble traits or deeds from the rector's wife.

All this helped. Also, as yet, generalities had entirely sufficed with the three Terry girls who, in many ways, were surprisingly young for their years. In school they had never been approached with those

whispered secrets that some girls love; this was both because they were the rector's daughters, and because it was well known that they never had secrets from their mother, which, by the way, is about the biggest safeguard any girl can have. And there was another reason: there was a certain entirely unconscious aloofness about Alison and her sisters that discouraged indiscreet advances.

The question was, how long was Mrs. Terry going to be able to keep up her dodging? Still, time enough to meet trouble when trouble comes. And any one will admit that it is often a difficult task to make perfect theory fit perfect practice. If results are fair tests, most parents might profitably copy Mrs. Terry's methods.

Alison and her mother had been sitting silently in the quiet room. Now, the girl looked around on the familiar scene. "Mother's room" had been the haven *de luxe* in that household, ever since she could remember. It always imparted a feeling of peace.

"Did you and Aunt Alison live near each other and go to the same school?" she presently asked.

"Yes. I, as you know, was an orphan and lived with my aunt, who died just before my marriage. Alison's home was very gay, and I was always welcome there; she had a very fashionable mother and a handsome brother, two or three years older than herself. Her father, too, was exceedingly fond of entertaining and of all the good things of life; he was a famous whip, and card-player, and sportsman. All this seemed very wonderful to me; my own life was so quiet and secluded. My aunt—

your great-aunt Honor — had had a sad love affair. Her fiancé died only a month before the day that was set for their wedding. She gave away her beautiful trousseau to a friend who could not afford such a one and devoted herself forever afterwards to the Church and its affairs. She had a huge old house, and our life was very formal and stately, but very lonely for me. All the parties were clerical parties. I sat in the laps of Bishops all my childish life," concluded Mrs. Terry with a laugh.

She rose and, going to the mirror, patted her pretty hair into order.

"And now run and dress, my love," she said. "It is nearly seven. Your father will soon be calling us."

Alison kissed her mother's cheek and walked lingeringly from the room. She had a feeling that this hour was to live long in her memory; that the old familiar life was waning, while another waited to take its place. It was one of those moments of intense consciousness that sometimes write themselves in indelible Italics; future October afternoons would have the habit of measuring themselves against this one.

The passage to Alison's room led past that of her younger sister, Gertrude. Gertrude's door was ajar, and Gertrude's voice invited.

"Allie, come here. Look at this dressing-gown. Isn't it a duck? I've just finished it."

Gertrude stood in front of her mirror,— a vision of loveliness. All the Terry girls were pretty; in fact, the family standard of good looks was remarkably high. But Gertrude was exquisite. She

was a veritable beauty. Tall as a queen, slim as a wand, blonde as a Norse maiden, straight featured as a Greek statue, and lithe as an athlete, she was a joy to behold.

There has been much discussion since the world began as to how great an asset physical beauty is to a woman. If you want to settle the question once and for all, ask any woman who possesses it to exchange it for any other possible gift and see what she says. Offer her brains, or goodness, or even that elusive thing called charm. Will you tempt her? Not for one moment. *She knows.*

The Terry girls had never yet learned to covet such luxuries as wadded Japanese gowns or filmy French matinées; but as Gertrude revolved before her sister, exhibiting her homemade pink robe, she looked good enough to eat. Could anything have enhanced her beauty, it was probably just as well that she didn't possess it.

"It's simply lovely," admired Alison. "And it couldn't be more becoming. I love the way you've used the lace . . . Gertrude, I want to tell you something," and the wonderful news came out.

Gertrude was staggered but jubilant — genuinely jubilant.

"Oh, Al," she cried, hugging and kissing her sister, "I'm perfectly delighted. I can't tell you how glad I am. And you deserve it so absolutely. You're always on hand to take the nasty jobs, and fill up on holes, and everything. Bless your heart; it's perfectly dandy."

At dinner, Elsa, the eldest of the three sisters, came down a little late, looking like a French doll.

She was small and dainty, and usually managed to arrange things according to her own ideas. But as she went at it quietly and always avoided clashes, no one ever realized how clever she was.

She, too, offered congratulations when the great news was told her. But, deep down in her heart, there was a pang. It was sharp and insistent. One of Elsa Terry's hardest tasks was enjoyment of the good luck of others. Even her best-loved aroused her jealousy when they won the too warm approval of the Fates.

In the village of Coningsboro, it soon leaked out that Alison was an heiress. Probably Ellen or Delia overheard something and bragged of it. At any rate, much to Mr. Terry's annoyance, the report spread rapidly.

CHAPTER II

ELSA TERRY turned over in her bed and opened her eyes. It was pouring in steady sheets. She tried to remember what day it was; oh, yes, Monday. And Father and Mother were going away on an early train to a big Auxiliary Meeting.

The rectory household was run on the old-fashioned plan of a big Monday washing done at home by the two maids. This entailed the delegating of certain smaller tasks to the members of the family. Always, on Monday mornings, Mrs. Terry and her daughters washed the silver, filled the lamps, made the beds, dusted the rooms, and set the luncheon table. Then Ellen emerged from her tubs in time to serve luncheon, and housework for the Terry girls ceased for another week. Except, of course, in the case of any unusual festivities.

It wasn't a very severe programme, but it didn't appeal to the soul of Elsa Terry. A rainy washday in a two-servant house, with the mistress away, was not her idea of bliss. She decided that she had a backache.

"Alison," she called, hearing a step in the hall. But it was not Alison. Gertrude stuck her head in at the door, in response to her sister's voice.

"What do you want?" she asked. If clashes had been permitted in that family, they would inevitably have arisen between Elsa and Gertrude.

"Oh, Gertrude, won't you tell Alison that I don't feel well, and ask her to bring me up a tray when she has time? There is no hurry."

"You'd better get up," replied Gertrude unsympathetically. "It's Monday morning, and Mother's going away, and there's work to do. Of course, you forgot all that."

With which shot she departed, leaving the door in just the position that she knew Elsa hated. She had gone as far as she dared.

However, she delivered the message down-stairs, to an audience much more sympathetic than she had been. Alison promised to see about the tray, and Gertrude went over to kiss her father before sitting down to the table.

His youngest daughter, having been primarily the greatest disappointment of Mr. Terry's life, was now his absolute idol. Every one had hoped that Gertrude would be a boy, and she was to have been named John, after the beloved disciple. Fate willing otherwise, this third daughter of the Terry household had done her best to atone, by becoming a veritable tomboy. She played exclusively with the boys of her contemporary circle; she drilled an "army" equipped with wooden guns purchased with her own Christmas money; she, herself, was the "General," and at all school fêtes her army rallied in force to do her honor. No tree was too tall for her to climb, no wall too smooth to scale As a little girl, she had been her mother's despair; but always, whether little or big, she was the apple of her father's eye. He saw no flaw in her.

After a breakfast which lacked the usual rectory calm, Alison and Gertrude helped their mother into raincoat and overshoes, and Ellen announced that the hired hack was waiting at the door. It rumbled away, somewhat later, amid a flutter of handkerchiefs and waving of kisses that a pair of average modern daughters would hardly accord to parents sailing for Europe.

Going back into the dining-room, Alison began to arrange a dainty tray.

"Don't do any of the work till I come back, Gertsie," she said. "It won't take me a minute to fix Elsa up, and then we'll attend to things together."

She carried the tray to Elsa's room and set it on a convenient table. Then, throwing a dressing gown around her sister's shoulders, she closed the windows, pulled the shades to a comfortable height, and asked whether there was anything else that Elsa wanted.

"Do you know, Alison, I think you look better in your morning clothes than in anything else," said Elsa. She was very quick at paying graceful compliments, but equally quick at discounting those that fell from the lips of others.

"Do I?" asked Alison. She glanced absently at her charming image in the mirror and gave her belt a little twitch. In sooth, she was a "morning girl" *par excellence* — trig, wholesome, radiant. No artificial light could enhance the delicacy of her skin; no elaborate evening clothes could better exploit her svelte figure than did the plain serge skirt and mannish blouse which composed her workaday

toilet. Alison's figure and carriage were her best points.

Still absently, she lifted a photograph from the dressing table. It was of Elsa's fiancé!

"That's awfully good of Roscoe," she began, when suddenly, from down-stairs, there arose a burst of sound. It was a pounding dissonant noise, produced by Gertrude with the piano as an implement.

"Oh, goodness!" cried Elsa fretfully, "isn't that just like Gertrude? She's doing it on purpose to tease me. That isn't real practicing, and she knows it. Just slip me that novel over there, Alison, and go down and make her stop. The young imp!"

Alison could hardly keep her face straight as she ran down-stairs again.

"Gertrude," she said, shaking her head at the culprit, "don't pound like that. You'll ruin both the piano and Elsa's nerves."

"I must practice."

"Yes, but you're not practicing now, and you know it."

"All right, I'll play my scales; Elsa always enjoys those," and off she started at top speed.

"Come on, you monkey," laughed Alison, "come and let's get to work."

Gertrude finally followed.

"To be entirely frank with you, Allie," she remarked, "Elsa makes me tired. Of course she is no more ill than we are."

"Oh, she may be, dear. You know that her back does trouble her."

"Bosh! Just because she had typhoid fever four years ago and found how agreeable it was to be waited on, she's been clinging to that back of hers ever since."

"Oh, well," answered Alison leniently, "what difference does it make? Come on and let's finish up this work. I have some copying to do for Father."

"That's what you get for writing such a nice, clear, legible hand, instead of scrawling all over the paper as Elsa and I do. Isn't it queer, Allie, the more you can do, the more you have to? I've always noticed it. That's why I refuse absolutely to learn to carve, or play dance music."

With all their industry, it was eleven o'clock before Alison was free to sit down to the copying she had mentioned. Ensconced in her father's desk-chair by the study window, she still found it hard to keep her mind on its task. It wanted to be free, to wander and to wonder.

Of all the rectory rooms, Alison loved the study the best. Its size and dignity and softly blended tones made a strong appeal to her artistic sense. To-day it was particularly homey because of the open fire and the tempestuous storm outside.

All her life Alison had loved a rainy day. When, as a child, she used to awaken to one, she would whisper to herself, "Oh, you *dear* day, how I love you!" At school, when there would occasionally come a morning so dark as to necessitate artificial lights, Alison would gloat over the weirdness of it and would almost dislike to see the final triumph of the sun as it struggled through the clouds. Mr.

Terry always insisted that Alison had "duck blood" in her.

She sat now, absolutely luxuriating in the wildness of the autumn tempest. On the panes, the swiftly running drops reminded her of hobgoblin tumblebugs. On the pavement, their dash and rebound made her think of a marionette show she had seen as a child. Pulled by invisible wires, the stiff figures had danced and jumped and bounced exactly as did these merry raindrops outside. "Little dancing men and women" Alison had named them, years ago.

No city dweller knows the real beauty of an autumnal storm: the wet swirl of yellow leaves; the sodden masses in which they ultimately lie piled; the wildly tossing trees whose branches are farther denuded by each fresh blast, and whose wet trunks gleam like softly polished metal; the bowing and bending stems of bushes, blossom-tipped and heavy — all these things can be watched only in a landscape that is rural or, at least, suburban. Cities are always detestable in any sort of storm; in them, wind-storms, instead of being wild and majestic, are dusty and filthy; snowstorms are inconvenient instead of exquisite, dingy instead of dazzling; sleet storms mean nothing but danger. It is the country for storms.

At last Alison dragged herself by main force to her work, but inside her were all the feelings that she had not even attempted to put into words: the assurance of kinship with the wildness of the elements, coupled with the luxurious sense of sanctuary in the midst of violence; a pervading throb of under-

standing, and of shelter, and well-being, filled her exquisitely.

At luncheon Elsa appeared, and she was in a matinée. This was against the rules of the Terry household; no one but Elsa had ever attempted it, and she, only since her illness.

The conversation turned on a tea that Leila Russell, the "trolley line" heiress, was giving that afternoon.

"Why do you suppose she chose Monday," wondered Alison.

"Just because it *was* Monday, and to show that all days are alike in the houses of the rich," answered Elsa. "I've heard her say that among the fashionable families she visits, Monday is the favorite day for entertaining."

"I wish you could go, Allie," interrupted Gertrude. "Not that you'd enjoy it so much, probably, but because it is so much better fun to have you."

Alison, in mourning for her godmother, was debarred from all present festivities. In Coningsboro they even had time to mourn, and if that isn't proof of leisure, I don't know what is. A Metropolitan young man of my acquaintance once went to a dance on the evening of his father's funeral day, because he was "so nervous that he absolutely had to do something to distract himself."

"I suppose Leila will be resplendent," observed Elsa.

"I suppose so," answered her younger sister. "I'll tell you all about it when I get home."

All three of these girls would have given a great

deal to be able to talk things over naturally, and to say what they really thought about them,— just at home, just to each other — not necessarily unkindly, but frankly. The restraint which had always been imposed on them was galling, even after long years of training. It was the outcome of pure goodness, yet it was as artificial as Leila Russell's gentility. High standards are always stilts, but their absence is chaos. To stalk or to crawl, seems to be the range of human choice.

"How it pours," said Gertrude suddenly. "I wish we weren't going out. It would be such a cosy afternoon at home."

"You are to have the hack," replied Alison. "Mother said so. But why do you go if you don't want to?"

"Oh, it will be nice when we get there," Elsa observed, "and in the hack we'll be all right. Don't default, Gertrude; I hate running around alone. Roscoe is to meet us there."

"Then I'll have the pleasure of running around alone. What an unselfish person you are, Elsa."

Her sister disdained to reply. "Come in about four o'clock and help hook me up, will you, Alison?" she asked as she rose from the table.

Something after four o'clock, Elsa and Gertrude Terry descended from the hack in front of a rococo pointed-stone house, with many turrets and numerous crude stained-glass windows. Opening their umbrellas to the blast, they hurried up the walk. Mr. Russell was planning to build what he called "a portcoshay," but it was not yet in existence. Hence the walk up the path in the rain.

From all directions umbrellas were approaching. Evidently the party was to be large, and this was the proper hour of arrival. An imposing maid-servant stood on guard at the door.

The Terry girls did not know the house very well; it was not one that they frequented; the Russells were new aspirants for social honors. Even in Coningsboro, there were upper tens and lower hundreds; there were snobs and leaders and pushers; there were those whose positions were established, and those who were seeking to establish similar ones. Where are there not these things? To the dweller in the metropolis, Coningsboro's social strivings might seem humorous, and its ultimate prizes slight. Perhaps, in royal circles, metropolitan social striving looks equally amusing.

"Will you lay off up-stairs, front room on the right," asked the effulgent domestic, and Elsa and her sister went up-stairs to "lay off" as invited.

The entire house was artificially darkened and artificially lighted. Hothouse flowers were everywhere. Groups of girls were giggling and greeting and prinking in the "front room on the right," and groups of rather disconsolate-looking youths were issuing from the opposite chamber. American manhood does not shine at afternoon teas.

Down-stairs, Leila Russell and her mother received alone. Both were resplendent, self-conscious, and beaming. The arms of the débutante were full of flowers. She continually apologized for her inability to detach herself sufficiently to greet her guests with a hand-clasp.

"These violets, alone, weigh three pounds," she

kept announcing. Violets by the pound and pearls by the yard formed Leila's heaven.

A caterer was in charge, and waiters hovered everywhere. This was an innovation in local custom. Only at the three annual "Assemblies" had such service heretofore been seen in Coningsboro. But if the Russells weren't impressive, they were nothing.

As the afternoon wore on, Leila found a chance to say to each of her guests:

"At last, I am at liberty to speak of it: Madeleine Norton's engagement is announced! A New York man. She will live in New York."

This failed to produce any sensation. Scarcely any of the guests knew who Madeleine Norton was. Most of them asked.

"Oh, don't you remember? I made two visits at the Nortons', on their wonderful estate. The younger daughter, Rhoda, is one of my intimate school friends; Madeleine is the older sister, and a tearing beauty! In spite of the difference in our ages, she has always been perfectly sweet to me. I am *so* excited over her engagement! I have known about it for some time but, of course, I could not speak of it till it was announced."

That was always the way with Leila Russell and her mother. They had that inevitable attribute of all small natures, an exaggerated love of unnecessary mysteries and secrets. They made secrets of everything.

The tea dragged somewhat. There was nothing to do, it was before the days of afternoon dancing. Persons who had nothing in common, or who saw

each other every day anyhow, stood around in groups and tried to make conversation. Such subjects as the decorations and the weather were soon worn threadbare. All the girls were somewhat excited over the report that the old Coningsby place had been taken by a handsome young man who proposed to spend the winter in it. Was it true, they wondered? And, if so, would he be apt to mingle in local festivities or to hold himself aloof? Was he a bachelor, or a widower, or had he a wife? Every one asked, and no one knew. Mrs. Russell and her daughter were alert at every mention of him.

"They say he has spent a fortune doing the place over," announced the matron.

"Then he must be going to stay," simpered Leila. "We must call on him, Mamma."

Gertrude Terry, within earshot, turned quickly, and her eyes began to dance. She had one Russell joke, at least, to carry home to Allie.

"He has a wife then?" she questioned demurely.

"Well — I don't really know," admitted her hostess. "But don't you think that he must be all the lonelier if he hasn't? Every house needs a woman's touch, I always say. I know Mr. R. could never get on without some one to look after him."

One other good conversational stand-by there was, in the shape of an approaching tennis tournament — the first of its kind ever held in Coningsboro and the first to offer cups as prizes. Three tennis courts on the outskirts of the town were Coningsboro's substitute for a Country Club.

At last, good-byes were said almost in chorus, and

the guests departed in a body. Mrs. Russell and her daughter were left to the most enjoyable part of their every festivity — complacent comments on their own elegance and criticism of the various guests.

The rain had slackened, and Elsa and Gertrude Terry were escorted home by Roscoe Bartow — Elsa's future husband.

"Is Alison home?" he asked, as the trio entered the Rectory. "I want to talk to her about that tennis match."

"Alison, where are you?" called Elsa in response to his question.

"Here," answered Alison, appearing at the head of the stairway.

"Well, Ros is here, and he wants to talk tennis tournament with you."

Alison came running down, munching the last little hot biscuit that Ellen had brought on her solitary tea tray. She seated herself on the next to bottom step of the broad stairway and clasped her hands around her knees.

"Hello, Roscoe," she greeted. "What is it?"

She and her future brother-in-law were entered as partners in the approaching tournament. Elsa didn't care for sports, and would always rather be in the audience. Both her sisters, on the other hand, played an excellent game of tennis.

"What is it?" repeated Alison.

"Why, see here, Alison," said the good-looking young fellow confronting her, "you and I have a very fair show at those cups, if you'll only go at it right. But in that practice game, the other day,

you let Ed Pemberton and Maisie Carter beat us, just because you wouldn't keep playing the weaker partner. You know perfectly well that Maisie's game is brilliant but not lasting; you can easily tire her out."

"But that's just it," interrupted Alison eagerly; "she does get tired out. Didn't you see how pale she was, and how she pressed her hand to her side every once in a while?"

"Well, that was your chance. You should have smashed every ball at her."

"That would have been brutal—!"

"Not at all. That's the game. That's the way to win. You win a race because the other fellow gets winded before you do, don't you? Maisie Carter takes her chances when she goes into a tournament, just as every one else does. If she hasn't staying powers, she'll be beaten. It isn't your business to protect her, and you're not playing fair to your partner when you do it."

"But that's such a mean way to win."

"Mean? What's mean about it? It's the only way there is."

"Well," said Alison slowly, "I think things are queer. In everything else, you're taught to protect the weak and to help them. And in sport, you have to fall on them like vultures, it appears."

"Yes, you certainly do. It's all fair; because every one is doing the same thing, you see."

So Alison carried another of life's problems upstairs with her, to thresh out at her leisure.

CHAPTER III

LATER in that same week, Mr. and Mrs. Terry and Alison were due to take supper at the home of Mr. Terry's Senior Warden — Judge Howland. Once in every fortnight they went, following a custom of many years' standing. No other guests were ever invited, so Alison's present mourning was no bar. Moreover, she was the pivot of the affair. Poor old Judge Howland apparently hated all the world with the exception of this one girl, Alison Terry. She was the light of his fierce old eyes. From her babyhood, he had adored her.

"I suppose you'll have your usual festive time, Allie," said Gertrude, as she helped hook her sister into her modest evening-gown, "I don't see how you stand it."

"Why, I like it."

"Now, Allie! If you want to sit in a dark room and play hymn tunes and ballads, you don't have to go to Judge Howland's to do it."

"No. But I'd honestly rather be in there than in the library with the rest of them. As I play, I think and make all my plans. The light streams across the hall from the other room, and I hear the murmur of the voices, and know that Judge Howland is happy, and that poor old Miss Debbie is pleased because he is pleased. It's really very cosy and old-timey."

"It must be thrilling," laughed Gertrude sarcastically. "I should think you'd be awfully excited when the evening comes around."

"It's all right, you monkey," insisted Alison, "and we always come home early."

"Yes, there's that," admitted her sister.

"Alison," called Mrs. Terry's voice down the hall, "are you ready, dear?"

"Yes, Mother, all ready. I'm just coming. Good-night, Gertsie, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"I'll be dying to hear. I'll probably be up when you get back. Two or three of the girls said they might run in. There — good-night. You look simply sweet, Al. It's a crime that there'll be no one to see you."

It was a wonderful starry night, and the Terrys walked to their destination. As they approached the house, a motor stopped in front of it, and a figure descended and entered the door.

"Why, Mother," said Alison in amazement, "there must be another guest. Who can it be, do you suppose? Who would drive on a night like this? Good gracious" (as they came to the gate), "it's an *automobile!* Look, Mother."

They were just entering the hall where a tall, slender, exceedingly attractive-looking man was being assisted out of his topcoat by his host. Judge Howland stood in velvet smoking-jacket and slippers, his high-shouldered and stooping figure fronting the entrance door. The removal of the guest's wraps disclosed him in evening clothes, thus plainly marking him as a stranger to Coningsboro's ways.

"Never thought to tell you not to tog yourself up," said the Judge, and turned to greet the new arrivals and to make the necessary introductions. These disclosed the stranger to be no less a personage than Mr. Kenneth Rawle, the recent target of Coningsboro's excruciating curiosity.

"How under the sun does he come to be here?" Alison was asking herself in astonishment. "Where could they have met? Won't I have one on Gertsie, though? She won't laugh so much at my parties after this."

Gertsie's sister was not a little thrilled, herself. Here was excitement with a vengeance! And at Judge Howland's, of all places in the world!

In the library, they were greeted by timid, fluttering Miss Debbie. She was clad in the best black satin whose style was never altered from year to year. On her head towered a lace cap of a fashion now nearly forgotten; purple quilled ribbons ornamented its top, and two long lace lappets framed Miss Debbie's narrow face. Her veined old hands lovingly squeezed Alison's firm young ones; she was nearly as fond of the girl as was her cranky brother-in-law, the autocratic master of the house.

Alison wished there were a chance for a word in Miss Debbie's private ear, she was so eager to know by what means the radiant stranger had been ensnared. But while they were still on their feet, supper was announced and the exit to the dining-room was made.

Judge Howland adhered rigidly to the country practice of always seating married couples next each other, quite as though they never had another chance

to converse. To-night, however, it served a good purpose, for it brought Alison and Mr. Rawle side by side. At one end sat the host with Mrs. Terry on his right and her husband next to her; at the other end was Miss Debbie between Mr. Terry and Mr. Rawle; and then, of course, Alison on the Judge's left and Mr. Rawle's right. An ideal arrangement.

The blessing, pronounced by Mr. Terry at a signal from his host, caught the stranger unawares. Evidently, he was not accustomed to such things; but he fell in quickly with the novel proceeding, and no one but Alison noticed that he had been interrupted in the act of speaking.

"Isn't this your first appearance in Coningsboro society?" asked the girl after the short silence that succeeded the blessing.

"It is. And the first of many, I hope, if there are any more such delightful surprises awaiting me. Do you never go out into the town, Miss Terry?"

"Into the town? Why, of course I do. What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have certainly never seen any one that looked in the least like you, and I have been driving and walking around here for nearly six weeks."

"Oh," laughed the girl in some confusion, "you wouldn't notice me."

"Wouldn't I? I rather think I should."

"Well, you haven't, though, for I've seen you two or three times."

"Impossible."

"But I have."

"Near? Be honest now. You know you haven't, and I know it too. I couldn't have missed you. You see, I have an eye."

Alison was about to reply, but she caught a familiar sign that showed her that the host was about to speak.

"Sh," she whispered, "Judge Howland is going to say something."

"Well, that needn't stop our talking, need it?"

"Yes . . . sh . . .!"

Gathering his listeners with his restless eyes, the Judge chafed at his bit until he had rounded up the last one, and then launched into his harangue. Throughout the evening it was the same. There was no unrestrained flow of verbal give-and-take. There was merely a series of monologues by the host. When he didn't want the floor, it was open to others, either in pairs or in general; but when he did want the floor, he must have it without interruption. Even the stranger at his board discovered this fact in a very short time.

It was a singular interpretation of the word "conversation." Every mouth closed when the Judge's opened. Even in the middle of a word, its speaker would hush expectantly.

And, as a matter of fact, the words of their host were amply worthy of their attention. Caustic, clever, bitter, biting, but never flat. There was no fault to find with the speaker, unless it were for his lack of the milk of human kindness. The only singular thing was the monopoly of attention that he demanded.

One of the strangest evidences of the influence

of inanimate things is the atmosphere created by various houses. It is not a thing to be evaded; it is instantly felt, and it is permeating. The moment you enter certain doors you are struck by a feeling of lightness and cheer; inside certain others you are immediately depressed. In Judge Howland's home, the keynote was not so much *de*pression as *re*pression. It settled on one like a heavy pall.

"I was saying, sir," said the Judge, holding with his eyes that one of his listeners of whose attention he was least certain, "I was saying that I am unfortunate enough to be cursed with a palate. Most persons have only stomachs and throats — receptacles for food and means of filling them. They are the lucky ones of the earth."

As he spoke, his lips curled back over his yellow old fangs, and his fierce eyes snapped. He had a magnificent head and a keen aquiline face. No one could doubt for a moment his brains, or his culture. Yet he inspired a distinct feeling of pity; he was evidently both lonely and unhappy.

"It is fortunate for your guests, sir, that you have," laughed Rawle, "if it is your palate they have to thank for many meals as delicious as this."

The Judge's gloomy eyes flashed him a look of pleasure. The old man was quick to appreciate a well-turned speech. And tremulous Aunt Debbie looked as though she might cry from sheer happiness. Too well did she know her brother-in-law's Epicurean palate, and the results of displeasing it in the smallest detail. Her life was one long effort and one long fear.

Somewhat later, the Judge spoke of a man who was "so mean as to begrudge a mouse the cheese that caught it," and Rawle threw back his head with a hearty laugh of appreciation. Judge Howland snorted in audible pleasure and by way of reward bade his two younger guests, "Go ahead and get acquainted. Don't waste all your time on an old man."

Availing themselves of this privilege, Alison and Rawle were soon deep in the process.

Kenneth Rawle was a young widower and the father of two children, a girl of six and a boy of four. Following an attack of scarlet fever, their physician had ordered a solid year of country life. "No fashionable resort, such as you are accustomed to haunting," he admonished the father, "but real old-fashioned country. Ponies and horses instead of motors; coasting-parties instead of dancing-classes; and bed every night at half-past five. Guess you can stand it one year, for their sakes."

"I rather think so," the father had answered.

"Ever spend a winter in the country in your life?"

"Never since I was a boy at boarding-school."

"Well, it won't hurt you a bit, yourself; of course, you'll fill the place up with friends. But take my advice and don't hit it up too hard. Live the simple life for once."

After some search, a farm had been discovered outside of Coningsboro — the old Coningsby place which had been owned for generations by the family from whom the town took its name. This, Rawle had purchased and proceeded to make over. Fur-

naces had been put in, bathrooms built, stables remodeled and filled, and the place newly furnished from top to bottom. A trained nurse with two underlings and a retinue of servants had been installed. It didn't sound much like Coningsboro.

"And you tore the place all out, just for a year?" Alison asked incredulously.

"A year is rather a long time to be uncomfortable; don't you think so, Miss Terry?"

("Oh," thought the girl to herself, "won't Leila Russell's eyes pop when she finds I've met him? If she could hear him talk, she'd be out there to-morrow to call. She'd probably spend the day.")

Aloud, she was asking:

"And how did you happen to meet Judge Howland?"

"In his law office, over some business regarding the title to the place. He was most kind and helpful. But I never dreamed that he was going to do me such a wonderful turn as this." He had a flattering habit of giving to every speech an intimate personal tone.

Judge Howland now entered the conversation with a question about Rawle's children whom he had seen driving their ponies in the town. This answered, the guest parried, by asking:

"Have you no children, Judge Howland?"

"One son, sir," snarled the Judge, and then there was a dead silence. Miss Debbie fluttered to the rescue.

"My nephew does not live at home; he is a writer."

"A writer? Surely he is not Philippse Howland,

the brilliant author of 'The Inca' and 'Mountebanks?' You are not his father?"

"I am, sir. I have that singular dishonor," thundered the old man. And there was an ominous pause in which the proverbial pin might well have been audible.

Rawle himself filled it.

"I consider those poems to be two of the most brilliant morsels that have been written in many a day," he said, and turning to Miss Debbie, tried to make conversation with her; but she was beyond speech.

After a time, things grew calm again, the host evidently making an almost superhuman effort to control himself. On leaving the table, he asked Alison for the usual music, and she went obediently across the hall to the piano, feeling intuitively that the simple old ballads and Scotch airs which were the Judge's favorites would prove his best nerve opiates.

The drawing-room was lighted to-night in honor of the new guest, and presently he wandered across the hall and joined the musician.

"How well you play," he said admiringly. "I love music."

"This is rather simple and old-fashioned; it's the only music that the Judge likes."

"Soothing," and he threw her a look that was a combination of humor and contrition. Then, "Can you play and talk?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Then, in the name of mercy tell me what awful break I made. Wasn't it horrible?"

"Pretty bad. I don't really know the truth, but no one ever mentions Phil Howland to his father. He went away years ago, after a terrific quarrel, and has never been back. His mother died, they say, of a broken heart. For years they didn't even know where the son was, but I think they do now."

"Do you know him?"

"No. I suppose I've seen him, as a child, but I don't remember him at all. My parents came to Coningsboro when I was only a year old; we lived in the old rectory then, and Gertrude, my younger sister, was born there. Then, when I was five, and Gertrude was three and a half, the new rectory was built, and we moved into it. And about that time Phil Howland went away to boarding school because they could do nothing with him at home. I suppose he came back in the holidays, but I never saw him; a child of five doesn't see much of a boy of thirteen, you know. And then after he went to college, he was expelled, and there was a terrible quarrel which ended in his leaving home. No one has ever mentioned him to his father from that day to this."

"Good heavens! I did make a break, didn't I. But the old Judge is so clever I should think he would appreciate his son's brilliancy and forgive him. For he is brilliant; don't you think so?"

"I don't know. I told you I didn't know him."

"Well, I don't know him either, of course. I meant those two things of his, 'Mountebanks' and 'The Inca.' They are famous. They made a positive furore. Surely you must think that they are brilliant?"

"I never read them."

"Never read them?"

"I was forbidden to."

Rawle almost caught his breath. It had been long since he had seen a girl of twenty or so who was "forbidden" to read certain things.

"And you honestly never did it?" he persisted.

"Certainly not," she answered, raising her clear eyes to his. "Why should I, when my parents asked me not to, and when there is so much else to read?"

He saw that she spoke the truth, and his heart suddenly sang a response to this old-world purity that was so far removed from prudery.

Before he left, Rawle had asked and received Mrs. Terry's permission to call.

Alison walked home between her parents in rather a maze. Fortunately, Gertrude was not up, the party having lasted longer than usual. Had she been, there might have been curtailed sleep for the two younger Terry sisters, that eventful night.

CHAPTER IV

MANY a mother, feeling the weight of her responsibilities lying too heavily upon her, had come to Mrs. Terry for advice on the training of daughters. "Your girls are so wonderful," was the universal cry. "How did you ever do it?"

"Common sense," Mrs. Terry always answered. "Common sense and lack of modern theories."

In sooth, however, it was much more than this. It was the combined efforts of a clear head, a warm heart, a flawless breeding, an infinite patience, and a vigilance that never slept. The first three ingredients go to make up that elusive quality known as tact; with the addition of the last two, they form a combination that is rather sure to win out in the long run. As Mrs. Terry was human and not divine, there were still a few weak spots in her system; but it would be difficult to produce one with fewer.

Some women are born to be mothers, and some are born to be wives. The woman who is born to be both is a queen among her sisters, and lucky are her children and the man who wins her for his life companion.

One of the flaws in Mrs. Terry's system was her prejudice against arguments, even friendly arguments. To an active intelligence, a keen argument is as stimulating and as strengthening as is any good physical exercise to the bodily muscles. Be it ad-

mitted that friendly argument has a tendency to develop into unfriendly argument, especially in the case of the young. Let effort then be made to teach youthful argument to confine itself to friendliness, rather than to strangle it at birth. Mrs. Terry herself, however, was as incapable of logical argument as she was of flying, and the practice was taboo in her home.

With her oldest and youngest daughter this special stricture mattered little; Elsa had inherited the maternal prejudice, and was too lazy, anyhow, to enjoy arguments. And Gertrude was indifferent to them, her interest lying rather with persons than with thoughts. Broadly speaking, Elsa Terry was interested in herself, Gertrude in people, and Alison in thoughts. This being so, Alison had a terrific desire to thresh out the " why " of everything that came under her observation.

The greatest proof of the real force of the mother's character was the way in which she had always been able to handle Alison, in spite of the difference in their mental type. The girl always sought reasons, the mother never wanted to give them; the younger mind was logical, the older one far less so. " That is enough, my dear, we won't argue the question " was the inevitable ultimatum at the end of each tentative discussion.

Granting that unquestioning obedience is the first duty of every child and the first right of every parent, the fact still remains that Mrs. Terry's method, carried to an excess, would be nothing more nor less than a mental " big stick." Just as a professional pugilist may silence every argument by the

force of a physical blow, so may the pedagogue silence real thirst for information by the formula, "Don't try to teach *me* anything, if you please. *I* am the teacher here, not you, I'll have you know."

Once, when Alison was in her early teens, she had asked her mother if it were not hypocritical to pretend to like persons whom one really did not like, and to treat every one equally.

"Not at all, my dear," Mrs. Terry had replied. "You do not pretend to like them. You merely look for the best in them and shut your eyes to that which is not so good. There is good in every one, and it is our duty to seek it. When a miner seeks for gold, he does not expect to find it all in pure unadulterated nuggets. He knows that it must be mixed with dross — sometimes even hidden by it. Yet the gold is there, and it is still valuable."

"Yes," cried the girl, "but he doesn't keep the dross; he throws it away and keeps just the gold. And he doesn't pretend that it's all just alike. And if he strikes a vein that has a lot of dirt and mighty little gold, he just says, 'Oh, this is a rotten vein,' and goes away and leaves it."

"Alison," said her mother sharply, "how often must I tell you not to use that word 'rotten'? It is disgusting."

"Well, forgive the word, please, Mother. I'll try to remember. But about that dross . . ."

"That is enough, Alison. No arguments, please."

And it had to be enough. After all, perhaps the lesson in self-control was more valuable to Alison than a dozen arguments would have been.

"No arguments and no gossip," was the motto of the house. The question was, would these girls be able to live up to their training, if they ever got out into the big world and into the thick of life? Or would there be reversion to a less exclusive type?

The very first mental riddle that Alison could remember had come up when she was a very little girl. She had found a strange word in the Bible and had asked her mother what it meant. Mrs. Terry, after a little hesitation, had replied that it was an old-fashioned word which had now no special meaning that her daughter would understand. (Note the saving clause.) Whereupon Alison, who had a very retentive memory, had proceeded to use the word and, of course, had chosen an occasion where there were a number of strangers present. For many a year, she used to wonder over the evident, though concealed, commotion she had produced, and her mother's subsequent sharp, but non-explanatory, rebuke.

From first to last, the keynote of Alison Terry's character was simplicity coupled with selflessness. Selflessness is probably the rarest of human attributes. It is no more like unselfishness than it is like selfishness. It is an almost absolute negation of the self-element and of self-consciousness. Its possessor judges himself as he would a stranger, when he thinks of himself at all, which is rarely. He commends the good and condemns the bad, with utter lack of partiality.

Mrs. Terry had a distinct sense of the difference between adult and juvenile intellects, a clear appreciation of the fact that they do not demand the

same food. She had not felt it necessary to tell her children, as children, the entire mystery of life. This had ensured them that innocent childhood which is the greatest asset in the world. No premature wisdom can ever take its place. When circumstances are so unfortunate as to make premature wisdom a necessary precaution, then it must, unfortunately, be taught. But to the home-reared, mother-sheltered child, mental innocence is a natural birthright.

From all of this, it may be seen that almost the only joint in Mrs. Terry's maternal armor was refusal to reason. And the average modern mother will probably take exception to my statement that that mattered surprisingly little.

Mrs. Terry knew that there was as little likelihood of reason being stifled as of veneration developing unaided. She knew that while none but the dullest child would fail to find the weak spot in the argument that sought to rob him of a coveted pleasure, it would be a very exceptional child who would yield gracefully to parental authority unless trained to do so. Reason is a natural gift, veneration an acquired one. Reason is like a rushing torrent: it may be curbed, it may be dammed, it may be diverted; but it is never destroyed, nor can it be indefinitely held back.

The average modern child scarcely knows the meaning of the word reverence. The Terry girls knew it well. They reverenced their parents, and they adored them. Not even among themselves was filial criticism ever whispered; filial criticism, by the way, is a practice more common than safe. But in

the Terry family, it would have been regarded with horror; it had not even mental existence.

It was a rare household. Perhaps the reason for Mrs. Terry's strong hold over her daughters was that she herself was so intensely human. Had she been flawless, she could never have been so beloved. She gloried in the fact that her three daughters were all fair to look upon; she confidently hoped to see them all married. No convent ideals were hers.

In the matter of isolation from connections and relations, the family situation was rather a peculiar one.

Mr. Terry was an only son, and the child of his father's old age. This father, a man of birth, of wealth, of simple tastes, and of scholarly habits, had married late in life, and he had made a singularly unfortunate choice. His pretty young wife chafed at the restraint imposed upon her and the rift between husband and wife grew wider with the years. One little daughter, the replica of her mother, was their only child until she was twelve years old. Then her little brother was born.

The new baby, being sickly, was left entirely to nurses and to his absolutely devoted father. When he was eight and his sister was a beauty of twenty, the mother and daughter went to Paris for the winter. Neither of them ever came back. The daughter married a wealthy banker, and the mother died on the eve of her intended return.

Mr. Terry and his little son led a singular life. Their only interests were books and each other. Just as the boy approached manhood, the father turned his attention to the study of the Christian re-

ligion from a purely historic standpoint. The result was, however, that the son embraced the new ideas with fervor, insisted on studying for holy orders, and was finally ordained a priest of the Episcopal Church.

The agnostic father, at first aghast, became more and more reconciled, particularly as he realized the calm and perfect happiness of his son. A few months after the young clergyman received his first call, as assistant in a large city parish, he was invited to a clerical tea party at the house of one of his parishioners, Miss Honor Masland. It was a case of love at first sight between young Terry and the pretty niece of his hostess. Betrothal and marriage followed close on the heels of love.

Then came the call to Coningsboro, and down to the little town went the beatifically happy young couple, to take up their residence in the inconvenient old rectory, on a very small salary.

By the time his third little granddaughter was born, Archibald Terry, senior, was a very old man — very old and very happy. He saw his son's life blossoming with the promise of peace and happiness. He was devoted to his daughter-in-law, and the slave of his pretty grandbabies — all babies together, as there were but three and a half years between the first and the last.

The simplicity of the Coningsboro life made strong appeal to the old man. While he realized the class difference between his son's family and most of their new associates, he delighted in it. One of his inherent beliefs was that each man's salvation or damnation lay in himself and in those most

closely bound to him. He deplored general friendship and large circles of intimates; and he knew that they were not apt to thrive among unequals.

Only one thing troubled him — the dingy old rectory.

Thus it came about that he set himself the congenial task of the last two years of his life. He built and endowed what was still known as the "new" rectory of St. Mary's Church; endowed it, because otherwise it would have been too heavy a burden for the parish to carry. There was a perpetual fund that provided for all repairs and expenses, even to the services of a man to take care of the generous lawns. It was the only toy that Archibald Terry had ever bought for himself, and he played with it lovingly till Death closed his eyes.

It was a pity that he could not have lived to watch the unfolding of the mind of his granddaughter, Alison. He would have recognized so many traits and have rejoiced in them. However, length of days had brought him ultimate peace.

The rectory had been an expensive toy. It cut Mr. Terry's annual income down to about twelve thousand dollars, which he left evenly divided between his daughter, Juliette, and his son. The former didn't need it; to the latter it meant increased opportunities for charity.

"Aunt Juliette" was merely a name to the three Terry girls; it was little more to their father. None of them would have recognized the elegant Mrs. Lowe, had they met her by chance.

Family ties lacking, and home education precluding the chance of boarding-school acquaintances, it

followed that over-night guests at St. Mary's Rectory were rare. Nothing more exciting than visiting clergymen or delegates to clerical conventions ever materialized. Family life flowed smoothly and with few interruptions.

One month's vacation each summer did Mr. Terry permit himself, and then the entire family journeyed to an unfashionable mountain resort, famed for its air — the same place every year. When Elsa and Gertrude grew restive and wanted a change, it was explained to them that this place "rested Father" very wonderfully. He enjoyed the long tramps and the simplicity of the life. And the two girls, not having the slightest idea of the actual family income, acquiesced with sufficient grace in what they supposed was inevitable.

Two or three times a winter the Terrys saw a play in the city, which was three hours' journey from their home. It was a rather small city, but it seemed wonderfully big and festive to the quietly reared girls. For weeks they looked forward to these trips. The stay at the hotel, the two or three days of gayety, the shopping and fittings, and the theatre-party (at which they always saw some famous actor or actress) were the white high-lights of their existence. Elsa and Gertrude always came home a little discontented and impatient for the arrival of the results of the fittings; Alison walked around in a sort of a maze for days after her return, and did much secret scribbling in a big blank book. Then, gradually, accustomed habits reasserted their hold. and life became more restful and less puzzling.

Be it at once understood and admitted that the

Terry parents hugged their isolation to their hearts and entreated it to remain by their fireside. For themselves, nothing more was needed for happiness than their children and each other; after nearly twenty-five years of married life, they were still lovers. And well did they know the perils to their "system" should their three darlings once be turned loose on a stage setting of worldliness, surrounded by their social equals, and forced into leading rôles in life's real comedies and tragedies. Vaguely the parents looked forward to the days when their daughters would be "settled" in homes of their own, with established philosophies as safeguards, with babies as outlets, with devoted husbands as screens from life's rude blasts. But, when it came to explaining how all this was to happen, Mr. and Mrs. Terry could not have told you. They were well content with Elsa's choice, but the fact remained that she had actually preëmpted almost the only young man in Coningsboro whom they really considered eligible to the position of son-in-law. However, Time and Providence were the forces on which they pinned their hopes.

Deep down in their hearts, there was another tiny well-spring of content whose existence was not realized even by its possessors. Both Mr. and Mrs. Terry loved the pedestals to which they had grown so accustomed; why should they court a change which might necessitate their stepping down into any arena, however select?

CHAPTER V

THE impression produced upon Kenneth Rawle by the pretty girl he had met at Judge Howland's was a lasting one. Two days after the tea-party, Alison came home one afternoon to find Mr. Rawle sipping tea with her mother and Elsa.

He made no effort to hide his pleasure at seeing her again. A telephone call for Mrs. Terry soon left the three young people alone, and after some time Elsa took herself off. She didn't really want to, but she thought it only fair to Alison; had Elsa not been already engaged, she might have looked differently at the situation.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you again," said Rawle in his charming, intimate way, drawing his chair a little closer as he spoke. "I've been doing nothing but wonder how soon I dared come. Do you know, Miss Terry, your family has given me one of the surprises of my life?"

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Well, you are all so remarkably different from any one I expected to find down here. Take your sister, now — Miss Elsa, I think you called her?"

"Yes, she is really Miss Terry though, and I am Miss Alison."

"Oh, really? I thought you said your sister was younger."

"I have a younger sister, too — Gertrude. I'm

sorry she isn't in this afternoon. Just wait until you see her, if you want a pleasant surprise."

"It can't exceed the ones I have already had. To go back to Miss Elsa, she looks like a piece of French porcelain. And she is as *chic* as a fashion plate."

"Well, why not?"

"That is true; why not? Except that one judges a place by what one sees, and I have seen nothing in Coningsboro to prepare me for this. After all, Miss Terry, unless there are others here like you and your sister, I am justified in my surprise. And I'll bet there aren't many."

"Why, of course there are."

"Honestly? Some day I'll stump you to prove that. Do you go away much?"

"Scarcely at all."

"Well, you have a beautiful old home here."

"Doesn't it look old!" interrupted the girl; "we pride ourselves on that. The ivy and the shrubbery have grown so surprisingly. But really the house is not old at all," and she told him its history. "Have you never seen it before?" she concluded. "From the outside, I mean?"

"No, I have never before been in this part of the town."

"Then you don't go to our church. Where do you go?"

Rawle was somewhat staggered. He had not been inside a church since his wedding-day.

"I am coming to your church," he said rather lamely. But Alison didn't notice the lameness.

He lingered till it was quite dark. Alison went to the door with him and even out on to the piazza.

As they stood there, up came Gertrude, and Rawle was presented. To him the new comer was nothing but a tall slender figure with a very sweet voice. And presently he said good night and went away.

The next day, Gertrude Terry was in the house only to eat and sleep. She spent the entire time in the town, doing imaginary errands for herself and the whole family. And on the following day, it was the same thing.

Coningsboro being small, it required some skill to keep upon its principal thoroughfares without becoming conspicuous. But on her second day of vigil, Gertrude had two encounters and two conversations to help her while away the time.

First she met Judge Howland and, for a wonder, he stopped to speak.

"You'll save me a telephone message," he said graciously. "Tell your father and mother and Alison that I want them to come to supper to-morrow night instead of next week. A matter of Church business has just come up that I must discuss with your father, and your mother and Debbie can entertain each other while we're talking. And Alison must come. I need her music. And Debbie has been knitting some fool dew-dab for her, and wants to give it into her own hands. There'll be no one but ourselves, and I'll expect them. You won't forget the message?"

"No, I won't forget it."

"And you think they can come?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure they can. I know that Mother and Father have nothing on hand, and Alison

isn't making any engagements just now. I know they'll be delighted."

Somewhat farther along, Gertrude's heart gave a leap. She had seen the figure she was seeking. It was clad in riding togs and was on the other side of the street. Hurrying a bit, the girl crossed over so as to meet it face to face at the next corner.

"How do you do, Mr. Rawle?" she said, stopping and holding out her hand. "You don't know me, I am sure, for we met in the dark. I'm Gertrude Terry."

("By Jove," the man was saying to himself, "her sister was right. She's a perfect peach.")

They took a long walk. When Rawle desired, he could always make a very short cut to friendliness, and in the present case he met with no obstacles.

"I'm wondering," he said, when they parted, on making the discovery that it was a quarter of one o'clock, and that the entire morning had somehow flown, "I'm wondering whether I dare come in to call again this evening, or whether it would be too soon? Or" (noticing her hesitation), "to-morrow evening, perhaps?"

"To-night isn't too soon," smiled Gertrude, "but I think perhaps to-morrow would be better."

"Very well, then. I'll try to wait. How early may I come?"

"As early as you like. A little after eight."

"That's famous. It means a good long evening. Well — good-bye till then."

"Good-bye," she said, a little lower than she need, and with a droop of her pretty eyes.

She walked away with a pricking conscience, yet

jubilant. She was certainly born under a lucky star; to-morrow evening Elsa and Roscoe were due at a small dinner at Leila Russell's given in honor of her guest, Miss Rhoda Norton, the younger sister of that beauty and belle whose engagement to a "New York man" had just been announced.

Arrived home, Gertrude hastened to deliver Judge Howland's message. She said nothing of her other meeting or of her walk. And she spent the entire afternoon in her room, furbishing up a certain becoming frock and experimenting in coiffures. She had been out so much these last two days it probably felt good to rest.

Rawle's call was a wonderful success. It didn't take him long to discover that he could discuss persons and things more freely with Gertrude than with her sister. As soon as Judge Howland was mentioned, for instance, Gertrude said, "Isn't he an ogre?" Alison would never have said that.

Then, in the most matter-of-fact way, she had remarked, "You don't go to church, I suppose?" How under the sun had Gertrude Terry learned her wisdom?

"I'm about to begin," Rawle informed her fervently.

She invited him to go with her to the tennis tournament, which she had suddenly decided not to grace except in the capacity of onlooker. "It will probably bore you to death," she apologized.

"You know that it won't," her guest answered. "Not with the conditions which you are offering me."

From that evening, scarcely a day passed without

Kenneth Rawle's reminding the rectory family of his existence by personal calls, or notes, or invitations, or offerings of flowers, candy, books, or music. He took them motoring and promised to teach the two younger girls to drive a car. (Elsa, of course, didn't want to learn.) He was soon dropping in to meals as informally as though he were a relation. Every one liked him; every one sang his praises.

At the tennis match, he was nearly eaten up by the girls of the town —" natives " he and Gertrude secretly called them to each other. Especially by Miss Russell and her guest, Miss Norton, was he given every opportunity for better acquaintance.

If this latter young lady lived on " an estate," she must certainly have moved there recently — so impressed was she with money and all that it could buy, so eager to talk of her own possessions and family tree.

" Common little goose," observed Kenneth Rawle to Gertrude Terry.

" I'm not allowed to say 'yes,' " she answered archly; " that would be gossiping."

" You entrancing child," said the man, laughing. " Do the fetters prick? "

" Occasionally," she admitted.

Rawle gave some delightful dinner parties. Even Miss Debbie was whirled out to them in a limousine. Roscoe Bartow and Rawle became very friendly. In fact, Kenneth Rawle found himself enjoying life in quiet Coningsboro more than he had enjoyed anything for years.

One Sunday a stranger preached in St. Mary's, having exchanged pulpits with Mr. Terry for the

service. And the next day Leila Russell and her guest were whispering to every one they met, hints of some dark scandal in the past life of this visiting clergyman. Tail-ends of the story came to Gertrude Terry's ears. She mentioned it to Alison, almost with bated breath. And Alison went straight to her mother, which was, of course, a very foolish thing to do. Neither Elsa nor Gertrude would have been guilty of such a blunder.

Alison didn't go in order to tell tales; she went red-hot with indignation, to get a first-hand denial from her mother, and thus be able to refute the report that there had once been unpleasant gossip about Mr. Page.

"Of course, Mother dear, I know that it isn't so," she said. "I just want your word for it."

She noticed that Mrs. Terry didn't answer.

"Mother," she cried sharply, "it isn't true? Not a clergyman!"

"Alison," replied Mrs. Terry, "you are not a child. You must know that human nature is frail and weak. It is not our business to look up past histories, and it is not always possible to deny scandals. That is not the thing. The thing is to hold out a helping hand to every one who is trying to walk straight, even though he may formerly have slipped. Where would any of us be if we were hounded by the memory of past faults and if we were never allowed to live them down?"

"But a *clergyman,* Mother."

"Alison, don't be ridiculous! A clergyman is only a man. He is human, like the rest of us."

"But, if it is true that he did wicked things, he

must have done them while he was a priest, while he was preaching sermons every Sunday and — why, even administering Communion. How could he stand up there and tell his congregation what to do, and then go down and commit deliberate sins, and go back and preach again? That *would* be scandalous! If he couldn't live right, he should have resigned his position."

"Alison," said Mrs. Terry, very coldly, "I hope that you are not going to become sharp and hard as you grow older. I sometimes fear it. And I sincerely trust, my child, that you will never stand in need of forgiveness, since you find it so difficult to accord. And now, if you please, we will close the discussion."

"Sharpness" and "hardness" were two rods that Mrs. Terry always held over her daughters; she used the words in contrast to their ideal opposites, "sweetness" and "softness." And she was wise in her choice of expressions. It never failed to rankle in Alison's soul when she was accused of being "hard" or "sharp."

But to-night, as she walked slowly away, not even the two dread words rankled as much as the unwelcome new thought which she was forced to carry with her. She wished she could forget it, or wake up and find that it wasn't true, after all.

CHAPTER VI

One November evening, Roscoe Bartow came in with a surprising bit of news.

"Phil Howland is home," he said.

"*What?*" cried every one.

"Yes. The old Judge got a telegram from him, and in three hours Phil followed it."

"But how did his father take it?"

"I don't know. I believe Phil has been at death's door. That's what I heard. They say he was in a hospital for weeks, though his father never knew it. And then he got out again and dragged around more dead than alive till some doctors told him it was all up with him, unless he got out of New York in a hurry and took his time about returning. He must have been pretty far gone, I should think, to risk a home-coming."

"Poor fellow," said Mrs. Terry softly, "sick, and alone, and feeling that home — his natural place of refuge — was closed to him! You'll use your influence with the Judge, won't you, my dear?" (turning to her husband); "get him to be as lenient as possible with the boy."

"Perhaps my influence won't even be needed," replied Mr. Terry; "it may be a case of the Prodigal Son."

But no one who knew Judge Howland quite dared to hope that.

On the night that Alison and her parents were next due at the Judge's, the chief thought in the girl's mind was whether or not the son of the house would put in an appearance. No one had yet seen him about the town, and beyond the mere fact of his return, no one could supply any information regarding him. Up to the last minute the Terrys rather expected to have their invitation recalled by telephone; but, no such message coming, they set out as usual at the appointed time.

Upon their arrival, there was no sign of the wanderer nor was any reference made to him. When they went in to the dining-room, Alison noticed that there was a place set next her own, but it remained vacant till the meal was half over. Then the door opened, and Phil Howland walked in. His father, who was in the middle of a speech, threw him a curt nod, and the younger man simply made a slight general inclination of the head and sank into the seat that was waiting for him.

The Judge's speech was a long one, and he never paused for a word of greeting. Alison had time to notice that the son was as tall as the father, and that he had a tendency to the family stoop; also that he looked frightfully ill and emaciated. She turned to smile at him, but his somber eyes were lowered and, though he served himself absently from the dishes which the servant presented, he ate almost nothing. His nervous hand, startlingly thin and bony, crumbled a slice of bread by the side of his plate. Alison's heart throbbed with pity.

At last, the Judge finished his story; but even at

its close, he took no notice of his son's presence. After an awkward pause, in which every one expected every one else to do something, and waited in vain for it to be done, poor Miss Debbie rushed to the breach.

"You know my nephew, don't you, dear?" she said to Alison. "Phil, this is Alison Terry; you used to know her when she was a child."

The man merely bowed; the girl saw that the eyes which he raised in greeting were dark and unhappy, that the cheeks were hollow, that the jaw was bluish from a shaven beard which would evidently have been black if permitted to grow, and that the lips were feverishly red. During the remainder of the meal, she bore the burden of an almost one-sided conversation. Mr. and Mrs. Terry also included their host's son in their conversation, and his Aunt Debbie tried to coax him to further speech. His father alone never once addressed him. In spite of her affection for Judge Howland, Alison's secret indignation was growing apace. She couldn't possibly help siding with the under dog.

It was an uncomfortable meal. There were so many topics to avoid and so few to use that things were rather strained. And the moment they left the table, Phil Howland disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

Later, as Alison sat playing in the semi-darkness, he stole into the room and, after wandering restlessly about, came to a pause near the piano.

"Do you like music?" she asked.

"Not particularly. Certainly not that kind. It gives me about as much pleasure as a baying dog or

a sobbing woman. I came down to ask you to play something different, or to stop."

She felt as though she had been struck.

"But your father," she said. "This is what he particularly requests. That is why I play it."

"Oh, of course," answered the man bitterly, "this is my father's house. I must never forget that."

Instantly Alison was sorry for him again. She took her hands from the keys.

"Come and see me," she said, "and I will play you the sort of music you like. Or even, I will let you off without any music, at all. There is nothing my mother loves so much as fussing over folks. You truly must come and give her a chance to pet you, and meet my sisters, Elsa and Gertrude. Do you remember them at all? Elsa is engaged to Roscoe Bartow. He read law with your father, and has just set up an office for himself."

"He is to be congratulated on his release," replied her companion. And it was in about this proportion that their short talk ran on. Before long, Phil rose.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said, "I am ordered very early hours." Then, as he reached the door, he paused. "Thank you for stopping," he added.

"Don't forget to come to see me," Alison admonished.

"No, I'll come some day. Good night," and he was gone.

Alison walked across the hall into the library.

"Judge Howland," she said, "I want to talk to

Miss Debbie about that new knitting stitch. Don't ask me to play any more to-night, will you?"

He threw her a quick suspicious look, but said nothing. She took his silence for consent.

The Terrys left early that evening. Looking back at the house, Alison saw that the guest room (which she knew Phil would be occupying) was a blaze of light. It was an hour since he had gone upstairs to sleep.

In spite of Alison's insistent invitation, Phil Howland did not hurry to the rectory. Ten days went by before the girl saw him again, and then she met him on the street by accident. He turned and joined her naturally enough and, apparently, with some degree of pleasure. But at her own door he said goodbye; it was only by persistent coaxing that she could induce him to come in.

The ice once broken, he yielded to the charm of the rectory's atmosphere and was soon as frequent a visitor as was Kenneth Rawle himself. Phil Howland was sometimes almost morosely silent, sometimes as voluble as a mercurial woman. When he talked, he talked brilliantly. His manner was too excitable, but his words flowed with the gush of a torrent. And they were beautiful words, well-chosen and exquisitely applied. He had the gift of picturesque expression. From his father he had inherited a talent for language, though he lacked his father's caustic, but virile, thought.

Phil chose invariably the most comfortable chair in the room and rarely rose at the approach of a woman. He smoked cigarettes incessantly and never dreamed of asking permission to do so. But

then, he was a sick man, and that made a difference.

At first, Mrs. Terry petted and mothered him to her heart's content but, as the days wore on, something seemed to be worrying her. Finally, she spoke to Alison.

"I am always glad to have Phil here, of course," she said, with rather an effort. "But I shall not be sorry when he is well again and gets back to his work. In the first place, constant loafing does no man any good."

"But, Mother, Mr. Rawle always loafs."

"I should hardly call his life loafing, Alison. Mr. Rawle is a man of leisure and the father of two very delicate children. He is, at present, devoting the whole of his life to them at some cost to his personal convenience."

With difficulty, Alison repressed a smile. It was involuntary, and she was ashamed of it, but she couldn't prevent its coming. The best she could do was to kill it at birth. A task such as Mrs. Terry's must necessarily increase in difficulty with the passage of the years; it is not easy to strangle adult reason. But by the time it has become adult, the good work is done; the lessons of reverence and self-control have been learned; the effect of maternal early effort is appreciated and will never be forgotten by the mature intelligence.

"I was about to say, when you interrupted me," Mrs. Terry continued, "that I am not entirely easy in my mind about Phil's being here so constantly. We are Judge Howland's life-long friends, and our first loyalty should be to him. Phil's past has been far from blameless, I fear. It would be the sorrow

of my life if — well — say, if Gertrude should take any special fancy to a man like Phil Howland. I could not feel safe in trusting my daughter's future to his hands."

She could not bring herself to meet her daughter's candid eyes.

Alison was silent for a long moment. Then, "What about Mr. Page?" she asked slowly.

"Mr. Page?"

"Yes. The man whose past we were to forget."

The mother threw a quick glance at her daughter to see whether this were impertinence. She realized that it was not.

"That is a very different matter," she rejoined, and her own voice was as quiet as Alison's. Both women were on the brink of a moral precipice, and they knew it. A misstep would be fatal. "Mr. Page," continued Mrs. Terry, "is making every effort to redeem an unfortunate past."

"Isn't Phil?"

"That is the exact point, Alison. We know nothing whatever about him."

There was a long pause, then:

"Mother," replied the girl, "I don't presume to dispute with you; but doesn't it seem as if the best way to find out would be to receive him here, under our own roof?"

"Perhaps it would," answered Mrs. Terry, and her voice sounded a little weary. Her daughter looked up quickly and uneasily at the new note. But the harm was done; her pity had first been keenly excited, then her sense of justice had been outraged, and finally she had been driven into taking up the

cudgels in behalf of the oppressed. A bad combination for a girl of Alison's temperament.

That night, Mrs. Terry put the matter in her husband's hands. Like most men in his position, he was first quite sure that his wife was making a mountain out of a molehill and then, once assured of the danger, even more helpless than she.

Not long after this, Phil Howland dined at the Terrys' for the first time. He just lounged in at six o'clock and then lounged on till bedtime.

Alison had rarely been as interested as she was by that night's conversation. Kenneth Rawle and Roscoe Bartow also happened to be guests, so that it was quite a dinner party in everything but formality. They all lingered long in the dining-room over the dessert and nuts and cigars, and finally decamped to the library *en masse*.

Some one mentioned socialism.

Now, be it known, in Coningsboro a murderer and a socialist were in practically the same class. When Alison Terry heard Phil Howland announcing himself as a socialist, she almost stopped breathing.

Kenneth Rawle, having mixed more in the world than the rest of Howland's audience, was the least surprised by the statement.

"That's all right, old man," he said; "if you can offer any *practical* suggestions for reform. I'd consider turning socialist myself if it would give me ideas in place of criticism, or if they'd even outline any really practicable plan for mending matters. I've never seen a socialist yet who wasn't merely a disgruntled theorist. Give him a million, and see

how he'd talk. He simply envies the man who has what he himself wants. He is bitter with hatred of the plutocrats. All the socialistic theories that I have ever heard promulgated have for a base the supposition that human nature will cease to be frail under the new system — that it will become perfect. It won't. It will still be human nature. If it could turn perfect, our present laws would be all right. It's not the laws that are at fault, it's the people. That's why I'm not a socialist."

"I shouldn't expect you to be," replied Phil, and his tone was insulting.

Rawle flushed.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because no one is, whose life is spent exclusively in the homes of millionaires."

"I might retaliate," said Rawle, speaking with extreme care, "by saying that a socialist was a socialist merely because his life was not spent exclusively in the homes of millionaires. But neither statement makes a good argument."

"Argument aside," cried Phil, "what chance have the poor? How much do you, do any of us, know of their pitiful struggle? Do you ever stop to think what wage the working man of to-day would be earning if it were not for labor unions? The unions are absolutely necessitated by the trusts."

"And the trusts by the unions," broke in Bartow. "The trusts must exist if the unions do. Labor trusts and money trusts — which can criticise the other?"

"But the money trusts came first. The strong oppressed the weak until the weak were forced to

resistance. Individually, they were as helpless as mice in a trap. They were starved, browbeaten, maltreated. Their little children, white, puny, undersized, were meat for the monster's maw. There was no chance, no hope. Who are the spine and sinew of any country? Working men. Whose backs bend to the burden, whose brawn braves the battle, whose bread is bran, whose board is bare? The working man's."

He talked at considerable length, and he talked cleverly. Not only did he say things that were new to most of his hearers, but he put them strikingly. Finally, he rose to his feet just as he capped his last climax.

"Well, good night," he said, "it's a subject on which I can never hold myself in check." And with a curt general nod, he was gone.

It snowed all that night, and the morning dawned clear as a bell. It was a beautiful white world on which opening eyes gazed. About three o'clock Phil Howland telephoned and asked Alison to take a walk with him.

They went far out into the country. Alison had always been an enthusiastic walker and loved the exercise; her companion, just beginning to feel a little of the vigor of returning health, and restless with the quiet humdrum routine of village life, was feverish to keep on the move as long as his strength permitted. Also, he loved to talk about himself, and he had never had as sympathetic and intelligent a listener as Alison Terry.

Before they had gone very far, the girl opened the subject of the conversation of the previous evening.

"I never before realized that side of it," she said. "It is simply appalling. I feel as though I must go out into the world and spend my life working for the weak and the downtrodden."

"My dear girl," said Phil cynically, "don't let your sympathies run away with you. In the first place you could do nothing and, in the second place, you'd have the disappointment of your life. You'd find the working people a damned grasping ungrateful lot. They'd rip you up the back the first chance they saw."

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed aghast.

"Just what I say. A woman makes a terrific mistake when she begins to talk about 'Reform.' Trust the masses to revenge themselves on the classes. Why, they're harpies. The men would knife their own brothers, if it meant an extra dollar. What do you think of a class of men who call themselves 'gunmen,' who spend their days gambling, or sporting with their mistresses, and who support themselves by taking murder-orders? Old women are procuresses; young ones are prostitutes; they 'go wrong' as they call it, from desire, pure and simple; men are the dupes for whom they lie in wait. They would rather batten on some male fool and squeeze him dry than support themselves by honest labor. It's easier. I wish you could be a man and walk on the streets of New York for just one evening. The—"

"Don't tell me any more," she gasped. He noticed that her voice sounded odd, but, naturally, he didn't care to be interrupted in a speech that he was enjoying.

"The parents exploit their own children," he continued, "exploit them in factories and mines, as beggars, as thieves, as prostitutes. Mothers purposely maim babies so that they may make a better income as beggars."

"You'll have to stop," she interrupted suddenly and sharply. "You are making me ill."

He glanced at her and saw that she was indeed as white as death. He had gone too far. The thoughts that he had expressed and the language that he had used were so familiar to him that he could not have foreseen their effect on his listener, nor could he have guessed that it was the first time in her life that she had heard many of his words pronounced. But looking at her horrified eyes, his own artistic sense and self-love were immediately in arms. It was up to him to regain his former place in her esteem, and to wipe out the unpleasant impression he had made.

"My dear child," he said, taking her gloved hand (it was the first time that he had ever touched her), "half-knowledge is the most dangerous thing there is. You have an unusually good mind for a woman, and a remarkably warm heart. But in spite of your mind, your heart might easily lead you to a wrong choice or decision. Isn't it better to know the truth? I am sure you are not so much of a coward as to seek peace of mind at the price of ignorance. If you went out into the world, as you suggest, you would suffer one thousand times what I am making you suffer. You would see the horrible things that I merely sketch. And, in addition, you would meet with miserable disappointment. You don't want to

be a mental ostrich, do you? Or a coward who shrinks from the very name of pain?"

"No," she said, "of course not. But it is all so horrible. I feel as if I should see it in the dark for the rest of my life."

"You'd see it in the dark for the rest of your life, all right, if you ever tried to mingle with it. You haven't the temperament for that sort of thing. There is plenty of other work to do, if you must work!"

"But the people," she insisted, "the working people? Surely your sympathy was with them last night?"

"Certainly it was. It is with them yet. But it doesn't make me think them angels, nor blind me to actual facts."

"Then what *do* you believe? Are you a socialist, or are you not?"

"I am both a socialist and a nonsocialist," he laughed. "I see the appeal on both sides, but I equally see the weak spots. As a matter of fact, Alison, I am cursed with the modern gift of fair-mindedness. 'Cursed' because it weakens one's force. A generation ago, no one could see more than one side of any question; one side was all white, the other all black. As a consequence, they ranged themselves on the white side, and fell on the black side like a hundred of brick. And the effect of the fall, having nothing to mitigate it, was very great. To-day, we know that nothing is all white nor all black; we see the good on both sides, and the bad as well. It makes our argument less forceful, but we are certainly nearer the truth than were our an-

cestors. I never heard of a question yet on which I couldn't argue equally well on both sides."

"But there must be thousands of them."

"I think not. Not when you come to study them and know the truth. I remember when I was a small boy I believed that all Republicans were pure snow and all Democrats were unadulterated mud. Every one in Coningsboro thought that. Once a visiting boy claimed that Republicans cheated as much as Democrats. I went to my father about it; it was before I stopped going to him with my questions, so it must have been while I was very young indeed. He hesitated for a moment, and then he said, 'Possibly, in the past, there has been some slight misrepresentation in the Republican party; *but the Democrats, sir, all cheat like Hell.*'"

Alison couldn't help laughing, it was so exactly like Judge Howland. Phil, seeing that he was winning out, smiled and continued:

"I have an exaggerated sense of artistic balance. It always makes me want to show an arrogant pedagogue the other side of his question. When I am with standpatters, I talk socialism; when I am with socialists, I pick all the flaws I can find in their arguments."

"But that sounds as though you talked for effect — talked to a gallery."

"I do. Every one does. If your talk is to have no effect, why waste breath and effort on it? As to the gallery, did you ever know any one who talked when he was alone?"

"No, of course not. But I talk because there are things I want to say."

"So do I. But the things I want to say are determined by the atmosphere in which I find myself. And they are always adverse to that atmosphere. Thus I avoid all cloying sweetness and what one of our late Presidents has called 'innocuous desuetude' of my mental faculties."

It was all puzzling but immensely interesting. The girl, thanks to lack of years and experience, was of course no match for her companion.

Later, however, he said a beautiful thing which she never forgot.

The sun was just slipping down behind the white-robed hills, a pink light kissed into rosy glow the more distant stretches and faded by imperceptible degrees into a soft gray foreground. Somewhere, the first snowstorm was being turned to advantage by a merry sleighing-party — the sound of voices and the tinkle of far-away bells were wafted to the ear on the crisp evening air. Phil stopped and looked around him.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he asked in a hushed voice. "I haven't seen this since I was a boy. It is the Kingdom of Purity; the temple bells are calling us to worship the great God of Chastity! See the pale cold glow of the fires which are forever watched and tended by his Vestal Virgins. May they never be extinguished!"

As they stood in silence, Alison's heart sang with happiness. No man could have such thoughts unless he were innately clean-minded. Pure streams don't flow from filthy sources.

They talked very little on the way home, and Phil did not come into the house, but Alison lived for

days on that walk. It was the most wonderful one she had ever taken! And how different — how utterly different — were Phil Howland's vivid, startling, even brutal, thoughts, from the smooth commonplaceness of Roscoe Bartow's views, or even the charming, flattering, intimate worldliness of Kenneth Rawle. It was not a question of virility, exactly; both Bartow and Rawle were manly men. But Phil was a poet. He was *Phil!*

CHAPTER VII

THE life of Judge Howland's son was anything but happy. He hated villages, he hated simplicity, and restrictions, and repression, and control, and everything that characterized his sojourn under the parental roof. He was homesick for New York. His father treated him as though he were a leper, and his Aunt Debbie wearied him with her furtive shy petting.

On the other hand, his still half-sick body shuddered with loathing at the remembrance of those lonely miserable weeks of illness and invalidism in a dirty New York flat; everything had been filthy, unwholesome, sodden, and poverty-stricken. Unless one had money and health enough to keep on the go and to frequent restaurants and theatres, New York was ghastly.

What he needed was what he lacked — money. Not only had he no money, but he had some very real debts.

Occasionally, the sale of a poem or paper, or a lucky evening at a green-covered table, put him on "Easy Street" for the time being. Those were the good days, but they never lasted long. Gaming-houses are not run for the benefit of the public. And Phil Howland's literary sales were astonishingly few and unremunerative, considering his two great hits, "The Inca" and "Mountebanks."

He fumed, and told himself that his father should certainly come to the front with an offer of a settled allowance. Phil was an only child, and the old boy must be well fixed. Naturally, the son could not suggest such a thing as an allowance; it would be too much like putting one's head in the lion's mouth and asking him not to chew. But his father should certainly "ante up." His stinginess was at the root of all the trouble.

The approach of Christmas added to Phil's depression. Every one was planning mysteries, and tying greens into ropes for church decorations, and making trimmings for Sunday-school trees, and bubbling over with the spirit of the season. Phil hated old-world myths as much as he hated churches and childish enthusiasms.

One day he was sitting in his father's library, gloomily telling the beads on his rosary of grievances, when the old Judge entered. He himself had been none too happy lately. The presence of Phil was a constant thorn pressing into his lacerated pride. But in addition to that, he was beginning to feel a gnawing fear very like the one that had made its home in Mrs. Terry's heart. Judge Howland had several times met his son walking with Alison Terry. Had it been Alison's sister, Gertrude, it is doubtful whether the Judge would have given the matter a second thought. Gertrude Terry might take care of herself; so might every one in the world, save Alison. And Judge Howland was fully convinced that his son would break the heart of any woman who cared for him.

Phil, looking up at his father, saw that the atmos-

phere was particularly squally. He rose to leave the room.

"Wait a minute, sir," thundered the old man; "I want to speak to you."

Phil waited.

Finally the father jumped into his subject, dispensing with preamble.

"I know you for a hound," he snarled, "but let me tell you one thing! If ever you try to marry Alison Terry for her money, you'll have me to reckon with. I'll frustrate your scheme at no matter what cost. I forbid you to entertain such a thought, and my roof shelters you only just so long as you obey me. Do you understand me?" And he stalked from the room, snorting with rage.

And until that moment, Phil Howland had never known that Alison Terry had any money. Verily, and with a vengeance, the old judge had exhorted his son "not to put beans up his nose."

Phil put on his hat and coat and walked down to the rectory. No one was in. They were all out on some "damned Christmas business."

He took a long walk alone, going far out into the country, and thinking so hard that he saw not a thing that he passed.

The thought of marriage irked him.

So did the thought of poverty.

He'd like to punish his father.

But he didn't want to risk punishing himself.

Alison Terry was charming.

But all women were alike at the end of three months.

She was young enough to be formed.

But her brain might prove a bar to the process.

He thought and walked, and walked and thought. But the final gist of his reflection was that marriage was long, and poverty might be short. He might make a hit, or luck might turn, or — well, he might inherit money. You never could tell.

He decided against marriage.

The Christmas season was a dream of happiness at St. Mary's Rectory and out at Kenneth Rawle's farm. There was a complete interchange of gifts, and all pleasures were shared in common. The Terry girls piled out with their mother, early on Christmas Eve, and helped dress the Christmas tree for little Dodo and Kennie Rawle, with whom they were now on terms of great intimacy. The magnificence of that tree almost took Mrs. Terry's breath. It blazed with electric lights (as precautions against the time-honored candles), and it stood in a yard in which mimic fountains played, mimic trains ran through tunnels and over bridges, and mechanical toys of all sorts performed their various stunts: birds sang, cats mewed, fiddlers fiddled, and dancers danced. It was a wonderful tree.

Christmas week was full of festivities which culminated with the New Year's Eve "Assembly." It was the first of the three yearly dances dignified by that title.

They were almost like big family parties. Always there was the same list of patronesses to sit and chat together, while their offspring danced; always the same music and decorations and menu. The "punch bowl" flowed with nothing more harm-

ful than fruit lemonade reddened with grape juice. Until recently, every patroness had worn the same gown at all three dances (indeed, most matronly wardrobes in Coningsboro boasted of but one evening frock), and the younger women had made old gowns look like new by such transparent artifices as replacing blue ribbons with pink or substituting a different colored "slip" under a gauze overdress. But of late there had been a tendency to hasten the pace of Coningsboro liveliness and to grow more up-to-date in the matter of change of raiment. Mrs. Russell and Leila led the band of progressives.

Alison, of course, was not going to the dance, the alloted period of her three months of mourning not yet having elapsed. Being alone in the house, she went early to bed and was therefore early to rise on the first day of the New Year.

She and Gertrude shared one bathroom; in going for her morning tub, Alison passed her sister's door and was surprised to see the latter fully dressed and walking around her room.

"Why, Gertsie," she cried, in astonishment, "how do you happen to be up so early? Didn't you sleep well? Happy New Year, dear."

"Happy New Year," answered Gertrude, turning on her sister a face that was transfigured with happiness. "Oh, Allie, it *is* a Happy New Year. Come in here; I want to tell you something. I wonder if you'll be surprised. I'm engaged."

"Engaged! Why, Gertrude Terry! How perfectly wonderful! Yes, I am surprised. I thought it would come some time, of course, but not this soon. When did it happen? Last night?"

Gertrude nodded beamingly.

"Gertsie," asked her sister rather hesitatingly, "is it awfully nice, dear?"

"Nice?" cried Gertrude. "Allie, it is simply heaven. I never imagined there was anything like it in the whole world. Why, do you know, after it happened, it didn't seem as if anything was real at all. The room just looked like a room in a dream, and though I saw the people, I didn't seem to take them in. It was just as if there were no one in the world but just Ken and me." She blushed as she pronounced her lover's name. "That is what he says I am to call him," she added.

They talked an hour. After breakfast Rawle came in and had a long interview with Mr. and Mrs. Terry in the study. Then he spent the morning with the family, declining, however, to stay to luncheon on account of his children. After their bedtime he was to return and dine with his future family-in-law.

Gertrude went up to her room for a beauty-nap, but Alison knew she was not taking it. From her own room, where she sat writing, she could hear Gertrude's restless movements.

"Poor baby," she said, with a tender smile, "she is too excited to sleep."

At that moment there came a tap on her door. It was Gertrude.

"Allie," she said, "are you too busy to come into my room?"

"Why, no, dear. Of course not," answered Alison, getting up immediately and following her sister.

Arrived in her own room, Gertrude locked the door; then she pushed Alison into a big chair, and throwing herself down beside it, buried her head in her sister's lap.

"I can't stand it," she said. "It will kill me if I don't tell you. And, oh, Allie, if you don't forgive me, it will break my heart. I'll never be happy again."

"Gertrude, what are you talking about?" demanded the bewildered elder sister. "Stop shaking so and talk sensibly; what is the matter with you? Aren't you happy? Tell me the trouble, dear."

"Happy? Happier than I ever dreamed any one could possibly be, except for this one thing. Allie, I'm a wicked, selfish pig. I've done you the meanest trick that one woman ever did another."

"Done *me* a mean trick. Gertrude, are you crazy?"

"No, not crazy in the least. I stole Kenneth Rawle from you. *Stole* him. There! Now you know," and she began to sob.

Alison was at her wit's end. She thought her sister was going into some sort of fever.

"Stole him from me?" she repeated. "Why, I never had him."

"No, but you could have had. It's my fault that you didn't. He liked you awfully that night at Judge Howland's. If it hadn't been for me, he'd have kept right on. But I wanted him. I tried to get him. I lied to get him. Wait, don't stop me; let me alone.— I did, too, I *lied* to get him. Just wait till you hear about it."

And out came the whole story of the stalking of

Rawle, the arrangement of the date for his call, and the nondelivery of his message to Alison.

"And now," sobbed the girl, having wrought herself up to a high pitch of excitement, "now it's going to turn on me and spoil all my happiness. I'll never be happy again. And it will serve me right."

In spite of the fact that she didn't care two pins for Kenneth Rawle except as a charming friend, Alison was aghast at her sister's confession. To think of Gertrude, her own sister, stooping to machinations that would be more worthy of Leila Russell and her kind. Naturally, however, she didn't say this.

"Gertrude," she murmured gently, stroking the beautiful bent head, "stop crying, dearest. You'll ruin your eyes for to-night. Listen to me. Nothing on earth could ever have made me want Kenneth Rawle for a husband, even if he had asked me a hundred times to marry him."

"On your honor?" cried Gertrude tremulously, raising her head from his sister's lap. "On your honor, Allie?" She looked perfectly incredulous.

"On my honor, Gertsie, I wouldn't have married him if he had been the only man in the world. That's my part of it. And his part is that he woudn't have asked me."

"He would if I hadn't stolen him. I'm perfectly sure of it."

"You are too absurd, Gertrude. You make Mr. Rawle out to be rather a weakling, caught by one woman and then by another, without any will of his own. He liked me, I know, just as I liked him. He likes me yet; I like him yet. But that is all there

is to it, or ever would have been. You and he were made for each other."

"And you honestly wouldn't have said yes, if he had wanted you?"

"I honestly wouldn't. The man I marry, Gertsie, if I ever do marry, must do more than *want* me. He must *need* me."

"Oh, Allie, if that isn't just like you! I suppose Ken is like a nice sleek well-fed cat, that doesn't need any one to care for it, and you want a poor sick cat like"— she caught herself up —"like those you're always bringing in," she cleverly concluded.

"Exactly," said Alison, laughing. "I'd rather fill a need than a want."

Gertrude flung herself on her sister's breast.

"Well, you darling," she cried fervently. "I can see that you are telling me the truth, and you make me absolutely happy."

"Gertrude, there is one thing I want to say to you."

"Well?"

"Just think of the unnecessary unhappiness you have given yourself, dear, by doing a thing you knew to be unworthy. If you hadn't stooped to it, everything would have happened just as it has happened, except that you would have had nothing with which to reproach yourself. Remember, that, darling, if you are ever tempted again."

"Don't you believe it," cried Gertrude, suddenly sitting up very straight. "Don't you believe, Allie, that things come out just the same, with help or without it. They don't. I want to tell you something. Most people have too much worldiness.

We, as a family, have not half enough. People have to live in the world and not in an ethereal millennium. They have to live like human beings, and not like angels, if they want to get anywhere. In every other career, a person is supposed to get up and work for the end he has in view. To work hard. Very well. For a woman like me, marriage is a career; it is the only career. And it is perfectly honorable, perfectly right, that I should work for what I want. Not, of course as I did, at the expense of my own sister. That was disgusting. But putting you out of the question, when I met Ken, when I knew that I wanted him and that he would be my ideal mate, I'd have been a fool to sit down and wait to see whether the same idea might occur to him. It was my business to give the idea to him!"

And so, in her supreme moment, Gertrude Terry had "reverted to type."

Her training had not gone for nothing. It had given her the grace to be ashamed of herself and to confess. It had marred her happiness. It had precluded indecency, immodesty, and wantonness. But, in her dainty way, she had spread her meshes just as carefully, just as skilfully, as any Cleopatra or Circe could ever have done.

After the engagement, Rawle as Gertrude's fiancé and Phil Howland as Alison's friend, met frequently at the rectory. Phil even developed the habit of going out to Rawle's farm and of lounging around there the greater part of a day. There were big rooms, and easy chairs, and cosy fires, and full bookshelves; there were also excellent meals and every-

thing that a man could want to smoke and drink. Well-trained servants were always at one's beck and call, and there were no women to get in one's way. It had all the advantages of a good club without a club's expense.

But after awhile Rawle, who of course talked everything over with Gertrude, said to her:

"Do you know, I'm terribly disappointed in Howland. I'd looked forward to great pleasure in knowing him, but it has never been realized. He strikes me as a great conceited slacker! And yet those two books of his were as exquisite as anything I've ever read in the English language."

"He talks well, too," said Gertrude.

"Yes, if you mean words, but not if you mean ideas. I've never heard him say anything that was worth listening to, except for the way it was put. But in his 'Inca' and 'Mountebanks,' not only is the language exquisite, but the thoughts are startlingly original. There is meat in every word. I'll read them to you after we are married."

Gertrude did not reply. Possibly because she had already read both the poems and, being too unsophisticated to understand their subtleties, had found them disappointing.

She had read them, and Alison had never dreamed of reading them. So that, after all, the ultimate character of a person seems to depend not altogether on training, but somewhat on congenital mould. The advice, "Choose a gentleman for your father," might well be supplemented with, "Pick out a white soul for your child."

And then, one day, something happened. No one

knew what the trouble was, but Kenneth Rawle and Phil Howland ceased to be friends. Phil stopped going to the farm, and when the two men met, in general company, they avoided each other; or, if that were impossible, merely acknowledged each other's presence by the barest of greetings.

Lent came early that year, and before any one realized it, the date for the second Assembly — the pre-Lenten one — rolled around. Alison Terry, who should have been delighted to get back to a less quiet life and should have welcomed the first chance with open arms, astonished her family by announcing that she wasn't going to the dance.

"I honestly don't feel like it. Please don't urge me," had been her sole excuse.

It was a night of wild wind, and after the family had gone, she sat in front of the fire with almost no other light, indulging in one of her pet luxuries. She called it "just feeling things." It was a sort of floating in inchoate thought, registering impressions without giving them actual shape, skimming from point to point in a sort of ether of sensation. It can not be described, and to no one to whom it is not natural could it be made comprehensible.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. Alison thought that something had been forgotten and sent for. She heard Ellen open the door, she heard a man's voice, and then Phil Howland strode into the room.

He was in a state of high nervous tension.

"What do you suppose my tender parent has just said to me?" he demanded, and Alison noted that his voice, though rough, was shaking. "That I broke my mother's heart. It is the blackest lie,

the damnedest lie, that any one ever told. He was the one who broke it. He treated her like a dog. She was as afraid as death of him. We both were. I have been flogged by him, as a child, till my flesh was in bloody welts. I have been horse-whipped, I, a little child. Of course I lied to him. Who wouldn't? I'd have done anything to protect myself. Imagine — a child of eight or nine and a great brute of forty, with the cruellest temper and the coldest heart that any vile body ever covered. When I was only ten years old I was locked out in the icy streets all night, one bitter winter night, because I wasn't in at half-past eight. Ten minutes late I was! And locked out! He is a damned cowardly brute, and he murdered my mother just as surely as if he had stuck a knife in her heart. And now he dares — he *dares* — to lay her death at my door. Why, I *loved* my mother. And she loved me. And she was the only soul on God's earth who ever did."

And suddenly he flung his arm across the back of a chair, bowed his face on it, and wept till his body shook.

Alison was horrified. She had never seen a man weep. She had never supposed that men did such things. Without one thought of herself, with never a trace of self-consciousness, she tried to comfort the man beside her.

When he left the house that night, he had asked her to be his wife, and she had consented.

He was obliged to go about eleven o'clock, in order to catch a train. He was taking a sleeper back to New York. It was impossible, he said, that

he should spend another night under the roof of the bully who had so abused and insulted him, and Alison could see that he was right. But before he went, she had succeeded in coaxing him into a very different frame of mind. He was calm, and he even smiled once or twice.

That night, Alison dozed in fitful snatches, and wakened a dozen times. It was a tempestuous night; the wind howled and moaned like some fierce demon in pain; out on the frozen streets echoed the hollow ring of a horse's hoofs; cold white moonlight bathed the hushed earth; a far-away clock struck with a mournful clang.

The girl could think of nothing but Eternity. She wondered if the Judgment Day wouldn't be like this. Suddenly the thought came to her that there was but one sure thing for any living soul — Death; and but one thing that really mattered — to be ready for it when it came.

It was a strange betrothal night!

CHAPTER VIII

AND then, things began to happen thick and fast.

First of all, came Phil's letter to Mr. Terry. Alison had impressed on her fiancé that this must be written at once. It took Mr. Terry to New York — a city that he had not seen for years — and kept him there for two days. During his absence his wife was strained and red-eyed; but on his return Alison's engagement was announced. There was a sharp contrast between the effect of her news and the effect of Gertrude's; but, in the Terry household, at least, every effort was made to treat the one as though it were just as welcome as the other.

Rawle didn't take any such pose in his *tête-à-têtes* with Gertrude.

"It's a perfect shame," he said. "She is worlds too good for him. I can't see how he ever won her."

"Oh, he was down and out," answered Gertrude, "and sick too. That's just like Allie . . . What was it that happened between you and Phil, Ken? What did he do? Something dreadful?"

"No, nothing dreadful, but we both lost our tempers pretty thoroughly. He got to hanging around the farm till I'd fall over him every time I went home. I'd go in, after a walk with you, and there he'd be lolling in my den, smoking and drinking my stuff, ordering my servants and even my

traps, and before we'd talked ten minutes he'd be getting off his confounded socialistic harangue. The more he used my things, the more he reviled them."

"What impudence! But it's just like him."

"Exactly. It seemed to irritate him to see any one having more than he had. Yet it was precisely my possessions that brought him to my house. At last, one day, he was specially offensive, and I told him what I thought of him; he answered very hotly, and we both said too much. He left the room with his face as livid as a corpse, and I hope he'll never enter it again. Naturally, a quarrel with me is no bar to his marriage with Alison. But it isn't that. It's that I'm afraid he'll break her heart. Alison knows no more of the world, and of men, than a baby. She hasn't the faintest conception of what her life with him may be like —"

"Why don't you speak to Father, if you feel that way?"

"Oh, I couldn't interfere in such a matter. And after all, what would I have to say? Nothing, but that Howland and I had quarrelled over a tom-fool argument. You see, I don't really know anything against him. It's nothing but a feeling. Perhaps it will come out all right. Alison may read him better than I do. The eyes of love, you know, . . ." and then he began to talk nonsense.

Judge Howland, however, had an unquestioned right to express his views, and he did it. There was a terrible interview in Mr. Terry's study. It lasted for two hours, and every one was miserable for days afterwards. The Judge had first tried

to bully the girl he loved into refusing to be his daughter-in-law; that failing, he pleaded with her, which, of course, was much more harrowing. But Alison never wavered. The old man left the house in fury, assuring Alison that she was digging her grave with her own hands, that she hadn't a chance, and that Phil would break her heart just as surely as he had broken his mother's. Then he went home and wrote the following letter to his son:

Sir:

Having received the news of your latest dastardly act, I have this to say to you:

It gives me no pleasure to reflect that you bear my name. But since that is inevitable, I shall at least insist that you do not further demean it by permitting a woman to support you.

I shall therefore make you an annual allowance of one thousand dollars ($1,000), the same to cease on the day that your wife leaves you, or that you break her heart.

ENOCH WILLOUGHBY HOWLAND.

So there was Phil Howland, assured of an annual income of twenty-five hundred dollars, plus a housekeeper, in addition to anything that he might make himself.

And it needed it all to hold him to his impulsive betrothal. When he returned to the old Bohemian life and the old associations, when the old influences asserted their sway, the thought of marriage with a fastidious girl of gentle birth and instincts was far from attractive to him.

Any one of a number of things would have broken the engagement. First, success for Phil in his ca-

reer; that coming, he would immediately have cast off his shackles. Second, his father's death; again he would have freed himself. Third, his own continued residence in Coningsboro; had he stayed there, almost inevitably something would have happened that would have forced Alison to break the engagement. But from the night of their betrothal till he returned to marry her, seven months later, she never saw the man into whose hands she had entrusted her future.

Phil Howland cursed his father's stinginess; the old boy should have come down with something handsome! A paltry thousand! It was absurd. But the fact remained that a thousand dollars was a thousand dollars more than nothing, and that this particular thousand brought another fifteen hundred in its train. Also, Phil's creditors were becoming insistent, and his luck was "rotten."

In sooth, the thousand dollars meant nearly as much to Judge Howland as it did to his son. Its payment really pinched, for he was far from being a rich man. He had his home and his country farm and a small practice: it sufficed for him, for his wants were few. But the village report that Judge Howland was secretly very wealthy was as far from the truth as are most reports.

His pride, however, was fierce. He would have starved rather than allow his son to be supported by Alison Terry. So he made the allowance and then used it as one uses the noose around the neck of a trained bear. By it, Phil was made to fill, with a sufficiently adequate number of letters, the interval between his engagement and his marriage. If the

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Judge, on meeting Alison and asking her when she had heard from his son, would receive a reluctant admission that it was "not for some time," he would immediately take matters into his own hands. The recalcitrant lover would be jogged with some such unique message as this:

"Write to your future wife at once.

"E. W. H."

And, above all, was the Judge's noose useful in bringing his son to the final decent point of suggesting a date for the wedding.

So Mr. and Mrs. Terry had to face three weddings, more or less immediate, three trousseaux, and a very lonely house for the future.

Mr. Terry had never saved a penny of his income; there were too many unfortunates in the world for that. In Coningsboro, and in those days, eight thousand dollars was a very large annual income. But many were the individuals and the families (by no means confined to Coningsboro) whose existence would have become a problem with Mr. Terry's bounties withdrawn.

Elsa helped solve the triple-wedding question — Elsa and Kenneth Rawle.

Rawle was unwilling to wait longer than June to be married. He wanted to take Gertrude to Europe for the summer, and he insisted that she should buy the greater part of her trousseau there, when he, as her husband, could give her such things as he wanted her to have. This relieved her of the long work of preparing a personal outfit, and the completeness of Rawle's various establishments

made it superfluous to bother about such things as household linen. Also, Rawle insisted that five months made an amply long engagement, and that he could not possibly wait any longer.

This was where Elsa came in. As the oldest, she calmly refused to permit her youngest sister's wedding to precede hers. Poor Elsa! Her path was thorny enough those days, without the addition of any unnecessary prickles.

Here had she been engaged for two years. Well-filled chests of lingerie and of household linen, gathered slowly piece by piece in the good old-fashioned way, amply attested to the two years' wait! There was no need for delay on that head. Roscoe Bartow was ready to support a small but adequate establishment. A little house (which Elsa would once have considered entirely satisfactory) and the services of one servant, Roscoe could immediately give her.

Everything would have been all right had Gertrude not flashed into the limelight with her jewels, and her motors, and her trips to Europe. Gertrude! The very youngest of the family!

You see, the Terry girls had more than one ancestor. Their father's father had imparted his mentality to Alison; but there was also their father's mother, from whom Elsa had a perfect right to inherit pettiness; and their father's beautiful sister, Juliette, whom Gertrude might well have resembled both in looks and in worldliness — and even that is only three! It is appalling to think of the geometrical progression in which ancestors multiply. Each generation has double the number of the preceding

one, and from any one of them may an individual inherit.

When Gertrude and Rawle began to talk of Europe, an odd thing happened. Gertrude spoke of her unknown aunt, in Paris, and it then transpired that Aunt Juliette and Kenneth were warm friends. Although there was the difference of a generation in their ages, the childless Mrs. Lowe had petted and spoiled Rawle from his boyhood. She had hoped to see him remarried. And now, when the lucky girl turned out to be her own niece, and when Rawle wrote of his future wife in such glowing terms, Aunt Juliette showed up handsomely. She invited Mr. and Mrs. Rawle to visit her on their wedding trip, and she sent each of her three nieces a thousand dollars.

Thanks to Elsa's insistence on sisterly etiquette, and Rawle's impatience to get Gertrude for his own, it was decided to have a big double wedding early in June. And with this, poor Elsa had to be content. She could still imagine the shining array of her new brother-in-law's rich and fashionable friends and the way that all eyes would turn on them when they took their places among the guests; she could picture the magnificent looking bridal pair that Gertrude and Kenneth would make. Elsa, with all her *bijou* prettiness, would be entirely eclipsed by her sister's height, and presence, and superior beauty. And, deep down in her heart, Elsa couldn't help remembering that while Coningsboro society, being obliged to send two gifts on the same day, would probably be tempted to divide into two parts the usual allowance for one, Kenneth Rawle's friends

would all send their magnificent presents to Gertrude alone. It *was* hard when you consider how much such things meant to Elsa Terry.

Alison was not to be married until the early autumn. It was undesirable that she should take up her residence in New York, with the hot summer just beginning, and the interim would give her a chance to collect her house linen and her trousseau. Also, her presence at home would help take the edge off the loneliness of the rectory.

So she figured in June as maid of honor to her two sisters. Standing at the chancel steps of the beautiful old church, which she had known since babyhood, she listened with new ears to the solemn words of the marriage service. How tremendous they were! How binding!

"Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!"

Why, there wasn't any such thing as divorce; there couldn't be, really. It was a mirage! Such bonds could not be severed!

Then, the wife's pledge; how complete was the promise:

"I, Elsa, take thee, Roscoe, to my wedded husband; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance, and thereto I give thee my troth."

Alison bowed her head on her bouquet and prayed.

"Oh, God, help us to be good. Keep us safe; make us happy," she whispered again and again.

With Gertrude off to Europe and one daughter instead of three at home, it was a strange summer in St. Mary's Rectory.

Elsa's trip lasted only a fortnight, and she returned radiant. She and her husband really loved each other, the little new home was charming, and Mother was always near to answer appeals. Every one fêted Elsa as the latest bride, and she smiled and beamed and fluttered most gracefully. With Gertrude and her exotic luxuries out of the way, there was scarcely a fly in Elsa's amber.

Alison was often at her sister's house, especially during the day. Her evenings she preferred to spend alone, rambling in the moonlight around the rectory grounds, or on dark nights curled up in a deck-chair on the rectory porch. But always, whether still or active, thinking, thinking, thinking.

She saved her evenings for thought and her thoughts for the evening. All day she was busy. She had her parents to pet and cheer, she had three places to fill instead of one, she had her dainty sewing and her appointments at the dressmaker's; she had last precepts to implant on her Sunday school pupils and the fickle Joey Mengle, and farewell visits to make on the old, and the sick, and the poor; and last, but not least, she had Gertrude's two step-children to fondle.

They were perfect fairies and warmly devoted to "Aunt Alison." Although their bodies and their manners had been in the hands of specialists, their childish imaginations had received no attention at all. Alison found them unacquainted with the most familiar nursery tales; "The Three Bears," "Snow

White and Rose Red," and "Hansel and Gretel," threw them into a frenzy of bliss. "Little One-Eye, little Two-Eyes, and little Three-Eyes," inspired them to an instant demand for a pet goat. Of course they got it. They got everything that had a price, but mighty little that had a value — until Alison came.

Alison had these babes with her every day until the first of August. Then they went off, with their train of attendants, to the seashore home of one of their aunts.

Alison wrote regularly to Phil. His answers, however, were one of her puzzles. They were never love letters as she had imagined love letters would be. Sometimes they were long and brilliant, but even in their length, terms of endearment and affection were few and far between. At other times the missives were almost curt — just a few pencilled lines with nothing in them that might not have been posted on a public billboard. And often the intervals between letters were surprisingly long.

However, Alison had always known that Phil was "different"; she had never expected him to do anything as the average man would do it. He was a poet — a genius.

He sent her the two great proofs of this — his "Inca" and "Mountebanks" — in the *édition de luxe*. She pored over them secretly — proud, puzzled, palpitating. The swing of their rhythm and the beauty of their language took her breath. As to their meaning, some of it she understood vividly, some partially, and some not at all. The half-revealed parts made her uncomfortable and set her

wondering. The descriptions of unveiled female loveliness startled her not a little. Altogether, the poems gave her neither unmitigated pleasure nor unmitigated pain.

Phil's avid craving for praise was another surprise. It was the daughter of the horse-leech, always crying for more. Do what she might, write what she would, she could never satisfy him. He was forever instancing certain passages that he feared she had missed. She got more letters from him on this subject than on all the others put together.

And so things went on until late September. Alison's wedding was set for the first day of October. It was to be much less elaborate than the June wedding, by the desire of both bride and bridegroom. All the parishioners and family acquaintances would have to be asked to the Church ceremony, of course, but the breakfast afterwards was to be very small.

Alison's one great regret was that Gertrude would not be there. Gertrude was having the most marvellous of trips and would not return for another month yet. Elsa was to be her sister's matron of honor.

Phil was due in Coningsboro some three days ahead of the wedding. He was to stay at the Bartow's, his own home being closed to him by reason of his pride.

Just before he came, Mrs. Terry took Alison into her room one evening, and gave her some vague counsel.

"My child, there are things in life that I have never discussed with you, because they are things

no woman should know until she is married. After the first shock, your good sense will show you that they are both natural and proper. Men, however, are strange beings. It should be the duty of every wife to yield to her husband's will, but, at the same time, always to insist on preserving her own self-respect."

And that was Alison Terry's preparation for marriage; for marriage with a man who was scarcely more than an acquaintance, of whom her parents knew but little, and that little none too reassuring! It was her introduction to a life which she realized as dimly as she realized the stage on which she was presently to step.

Had Gertrude been home, it would not have been so; Elsa was different, she wouldn't help; but Gertrude, being younger and franker than her mother, believed in calling a spade a spade, and had the courage of her own convictions. Besides which, she adored Alison with all her heart. However, the Fates had willed that Gertrude's confidences should be withheld.

On the first day of October, Alison Terry was married to the man whom she had chosen as her lifemate, and fared forth with him into a new world, there to seek her destiny.

BOOK TWO
THE MAELSTROM

CHAPTER I

THERE was not the slightest danger that Alison Howland would ever forget her wedding trip; nor that she would wish that it might be repeated.

It lasted two weeks and terminated in New York. Her first view of that great city was in the autumnal twilight and from the approaching ferryboat. She stood on the front deck, gazing alternately at the foaming water and the pale evening sky, and watching the marvelous panorama unfold. Great buildings were fire-sketched against a darkening background; flashing electric signs broke into showers of emeralds and rubies and zigzagged their multicolored lightning across the dim spaces; the ghost of a haze enveloped the magic city, and overhead a few white stars heralded night's ever-recurring miracle. Alison, looking upward, wondered if those could possibly be the same stars that twinkled over the Coningsboro rectory. Coningsboro, and everything connected with it, seemed distant by worlds of space and eternities of time.

Suddenly there flashed into the girl's mind the old-fashioned rhyme:

> Star light, star bright,
> First star I've seen to-night,
> I wish I may, I wish I might
> Have the wish I wish to-night.

What wish would she wish to-night if she were sure that it was going to be granted? She hardly knew.

They drove from the ferry to the Twenty-eighth Street boarding-house which was to be their home during their search for an apartment. Some Coningsboro friends had recommended this house to the Howlands, and Alison, who had taken it for granted that they would stop at an hotel, was not a little surprised at the eagerness with which Phil welcomed the idea. Little did she know of his financial plight; he realized that flat-finding would probably be a work of time and, also, that demands on his wife's private purse could hardly be made with decency during the honeymoon. His own purse was disappointingly light after the fortnight's wedding journey and the pre-nuptial expenses. A well-recommended boarding-house was a godsend.

A shabby colored waiter answered their ring and conducted them through a labyrinth of halls, well lighted and carpeted on the lower stories and at the front of the house — dimmer and dingier as you went upwards and backwards. "Look down, and not up," might well have been the motto of the house. The servant left them at their own door, and the bride and groom entered and gazed upon their new abode.

It was indescribably dreary. Even a handsome room, lacking the personal touch, is uninviting; a shabby one is dismal beyond words. When Alison found that in lieu of a bathroom she was provided with a washstand, and that her entire supply of hot water would be left at her door in a minute jug, she

decided that it would not be long until her own apartment sheltered her. She would lose no time in finding it.

Dinner was announced by a gong, and Phil and Alison responded to the call. The dining-room was very unlike any preconceived ideas of New York that the girl may have formed.

A suite of three long narrow rooms had been thrown into one. Small round tables, each accommodating four persons, were placed in a juxtaposition that left mere passageway. The light was glaring, the wall paper was hideous, the chairs were mismated, but the linen was clean. Two colored men in white jackets and two white maids in huge fuzzy pompadours waited upon the guests.

The food was more pretentious than appetizing; a number of courses succeeded each other, and their printed list would have made a fairly impressive menu. But nothing tempted the palate. It was the sort of meal that made one cling to the demi-tasse of black coffee (which formed its final course) as to a life preserver, and then go upstairs to nibble candy for the balance of the evening.

Alison looked around on her fellow boarders and saw nothing very worthy of attention; it was a dead level of commonplaceness. The men wore business clothes, and the women were in dark skirts and light blouses. Opinion seemed to be about evenly divided on the subject of hats or no hats.

Although four places were laid at the table to which Alison and her husband were conducted, no one came to occupy the other two chairs during the first few courses. Phil was in one of his moody

and irritable fits, and Alison was playing the already familiar rôle of pacifier, and succeeding fairly well, when there was an approaching froufrou of silken skirts, and two persons, a man and a woman, took the vacant places at the Howlands' table. On looking up, Alison nearly caught her breath in surprise.

The woman beside her was phenomenally tall, and the impression of height was further increased by her extreme slenderness. Although broad-shouldered and deep-bosomed, she was the typification of willowy length. Her shining hair, dark as a raven's wing, was closely bound around a beautiful oval head in defiance of the fashion of the day, which demanded elaborate coiffures. Great black eyes, heavy-lidded and long-lashed, burned under penciled brows in a face that was the color of a camelia petal.

The lady's costume was no less striking than its wearer; its color was scarlet, as vivid as her lips. The skirt dragged in a heavy swishing train, and the bodice was cut in a startlingly daring point, leaving the opening to be filled with a transparent film which enhanced, with no attempt at concealing, the beauty it covered. A tight wired collar of this same thin stuff rose to the ears, from the tips of which depended huge gold hoops that almost swept the shoulders.

Four bows of formal greeting were exchanged as the newcomers took their seats. The brilliant lady presently began to talk *to* her husband (if so inadequate a person might be supposed to occupy that position), but *at* the Howlands. The gist of

the conversation was such as to make one rather wonder how she happened to be stopping in her present humble abode rather than in some more congenial resort of the fashionable world, which, apparently, clamored so loudly for her presence.

Toward the end of the meal, an awkward thing happened. Phil, whose table manners were always rather sprawling, upset his coffee. By great good luck it did not inundate any of his neighbors; it merely ruined the tablecloth and necessitated much sopping. But it was enough to fan into a blaze the already sufficient irritation of the offender.

"Come on, let's get out of this," he muttered fiercely, and his wife had no choice but to follow in his wake, leaving her own coffee untasted.

She let him swear himself out when they reached their own room; that was one of the useful lessons that her honeymoon had taught her.

"Are you tired?" he suddenly demanded.

"A little," she answered. "Why?"

"Because I don't propose to spend the evening in this damned hole. There isn't even a chair that's fit to sit in. I'm going out. Do you want to come?"

"What to do?"

"Just take a walk."

"Oh, Phil, dear, I don't think I care to do that, after traveling all day."

"Just as you please," he snapped. "I'm going."

Realizing that it was a question of spending her first New York evening alone in a boarding-house bedroom, or of following her lord and master into the streets, Alison wisely chose the latter course.

In spite of her weariness, she was glad that she had come. They went over to Fifth Avenue, and she had her first glimpse of that wonderful thoroughfare. Although the season had not yet opened, she thought that the rush and the blaze of that night could scarcely be surpassed. Millions of carriages there seemed to be, miles of pleasure haunts, and myriads of pleasure seekers. It was like a hectic city of dreams.

At length even Phil was tired of walking, not, however, till Alison was nearly dropping with fatigue. Then, in spite of her protest, he insisted on conducting her into a garish restaurant for a "night-cap."

"You can't order ginger ale or lemonade here," he warned her. "You'd make me look silly."

"Very well," she acquiesced. Although the approval of a waiter in a restaurant did not seem to her to be of great moment, she did not care to open a discussion. She had no particular views or prejudices on the liquor question, never even having heard it discussed. A glass of sherry or port was a very usual form of hospitality in Coningsboro; and Alison, reminding herself that she was now a married woman, and must "submit to her husband's will" when she could do so without loss of self-respect, thought nothing of permitting the drink to be ordered.

"What will you have?" asked Phil.

"I don't know. I'm not up on such subjects. You'll have to order for me. What are you going to take?"

"Scotch and soda. But I don't believe you'd

like it. Suppose you try a mint julep"; and he gave the order.

Alison didn't like her drink, but she didn't say so. She sipped it, and nibbled the mint and the fruit (with which it was mistakenly garnished), and put in time as best she could. She had plenty of it to put in. Phil drank a surprising amount, and grew happier with each glass. Over and over again did Alison urge departure, but she was always told to "wait a minute."

Finally they rose. Phil swayed a little just at first, but regained his equilibrium almost immediately. He controlled his legs better than he did his tongue, which ran like a mill-clapper. He was not drunk, but he was distinctly not sober.

Once home, he almost fell into bed and into noisy sleep. Tired as she was, Alison lay awake for hours, trying to close her ears to his snores and her nostrils to the nauseating smell of whisky. She heard all the weird night sounds of a big city; the unearthly meowing of alley cats; the roll of cabs, replaced later by the rattling of early milk carts; even the tinkle of milk bottles in her own area found her still unsoothed and unsleeping.

And this was Alison Howland's welcome to New York! She, of the Coningsboro rectory!

Flat hunting proved discouraging work. After Alison had once learned to find her way around the city, her husband delegated the task entirely to her. As he very sensibly said, she was the one who must be pleased and the one who was hard to please; he was no help in the matter.

She never knew how Phil spent his days. She always left him in bed in the mornings; he said he would rather do without breakfast than get up for it. If she returned to luncheon, Phil had gone, and he never came home till dinner time.

Her breakfast she ate alone, but her luncheon she shared quite frequently with the tall beauty whose name, it developed, was Shapleigh. To her, Alison disclosed her discouragement.

"Rents are simply appalling," she said.

Mrs. Shapleigh smiled languidly. Her pose was that nothing was really too expensive; if she did without a thing it was from lack of desire, not from economy.

"You will have to get used to New York prices," she said indulgently.

"You and Mr. Shapleigh are New Yorkers, I suppose?"

"No-o; not exactly. Mr. Shapleigh's home was in Milwaukee, but he has been in business in New York for some years; and although I have lived here only since my marriage, I have always known the city very well. We are about to move into an apartment up-town. I have just found one that I think will suit us."

"I wish I were as lucky. All the up-town flats that I have seen were simply awful, to say nothing of their expense. The rooms were small, and many of them were dark and had no outlook except on an airshaft. There was no closet room whatever, and the bathrooms were scarcely big enough to turn around in. And there was a raw, crude look to them that I simply hated. I am growing quite dis-

couraged. I told Mr. Howland yesterday that I was going to look down-town, instead of up."

"Oh, you will find nothing there. No one lives down-town. You will never see anything of your friends down there. Have you friends in New York?"

"No, none. My mother has a cousin living here, but she hasn't returned to town for the winter yet. We are to meet her when she does. She lives down-town, I think. Isn't Gramercy Park down-town?"

"Oh, yes. But that is different. That is a very charming part of the city; but you won't find any apartments there. What is your cousin's name, Mrs. Howland?"

"Her name is Gansevoort; an odd name, isn't it? I suppose it's Dutch."

The beauty had looked up quickly; her languidness was quite forgotten.

"Not — Mrs. Bleecker Gansevoort?" she said.

"Why, yes. Do you know her?"

"No, I don't really know her. But, of course, I know of her. Every one does. She is quite one of the leaders. I am sure many of my friends must know her — You say you expect to see something of her?"

"When she gets back to town; yes, naturally. She is my mother's first cousin."

The thermometer of the beautiful Mrs. Shapleigh's cordiality had risen to fever heat. Her change of manner was amusing.

"You must be tired to death, hunting apartments," she presently cooed. "Why don't you

take an afternoon off and come out with me? There is to be a parade of mannequins at Félice's this afternoon — one of the first that has ever been given in New York. It is a French custom, you know. You may have seen it in Paris?"

"No, I have traveled very little. I have never been abroad."

"Then you must certainly come with me. I am leaving the house at about quarter of four."

"What is it?" asked Alison, "this parade of mannequins?"

The explanation did not fill her with enthusiasm. Just having purchased her trousseau, she did not look forward to buying any more clothes for some time. And while she loved pretty frocks and always wanted her own to be as charming as possible, she was not wildly interested in those that she had no thought of getting.

But Mrs. Shapleigh could be very insistent when she chose, and it ended in Alison promising to come to her room a little before four.

She found a resplendent vision awaiting her. Mrs. Shapleigh was robed in purple broadcloth, severely cut, with a huge corsage bouquet of orchids; a purple hat, that was as bizarre as it was becoming, crowned her sleek black head, and her sloe eyes and scarlet lips were revealed through the most daring of dotted veils.

To Alison's astonishment, a carriage waited at the door for them. As they entered it, Mrs. Shapleigh said graciously:

"You have one of the loveliest figures I ever saw."

"I?" exclaimed Alison. "Why it is not nearly as beautiful as yours."

She was sincere, but she was mistaken. Mrs. Shapleigh's figure was like a fashion plate; she devoted her life to its care. She dieted, and exercised, and had massage, and medicated baths, and heaven knows what, in the interest of this same figure. But she would have given much for the beautiful, natural, lithe lines of the girl at her side. The head was so proudly set, the long slender curves of throat, and hips, and bust, were so exquisitely drawn; the look of blood and of race was so apparent. All the Terry girls were beautifully finished; their hands and feet and wrists were slender; their insteps were arched; their finger tips were pointed; this "finishing" is a gift in itself, and a rare one.

Mrs. Shapleigh and her guest fell to talking again of flats.

"I don't want many rooms," said Alison, "but I do want them fairly large. I feel as if I couldn't stand being cooped up in those tiny boxes. I couldn't breathe freely in them."

Mrs. Shapleigh was rather clever at drawing inferences, as well as at extracting information.

"I suppose you were accustomed to large rooms at home?" she purred.

"That is exactly it. Of course I don't expect, nor need, rooms as large as the ones we had there; but these others look like chicken coops in comparison." She laughed as she said it.

"Where was your home, Mrs. Howland?"

"In a small place. Probably you never heard of

it. Coningsboro. My father, Mr. Terry, is the Episcopal clergyman there."

"Coningsboro? You don't mean it! I wonder if you knew a girl named Leila Russell?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Do you know her?"

"Yes. She was a school friend of my sister's, Rhoda Norton."

"Really? I have met your sister then." After a pause, Alison added, "And I suppose you are the beautiful Madeleine Norton of whom Leila talked so much?"

"Did she talk of me? Yes, I was Madeleine Norton. Poor little Leila; she was rather vulgar, wasn't she? My sister used quite to pity her, and we had her stay at the house in order to form her."

Vulgar though Leila certainly was, Alison had no intention of discussing her with this very new acquaintance. Neither did she think that there was much to choose between Leila and Rhoda. She had a shrewd idea that with these two girls it was a case of birds of a feather; also, that each bragged of the other's elegance merely to enhance her own importance, which only goes to show that we don't always make just the impression that we think we are making.

The parade of mannequins was one of the most surprising things that Alison Howland had ever seen. The simpering, posturing models, the wonderful costumes, their calculated allure which Alison felt without understanding, the indecency of the evening gowns (not yet toned down to wearing possibility), the stupendous price of everything, the rapt attention of the audience, and the dawning

realization of what a tremendous force in the world this clothes greed might easily come to be, all combined to make a very odd impression on the quietly reared girl. The after-taste of it was distinctly disagreeable.

It is needless to say that Mrs. Shapleigh lost no time in writing home for Mrs. Howland's credentials, and that her sister's reply (dilating, as it did, on Gertrude's marriage), was eminently satisfactory. Mrs. Shapleigh became sweetness itself, and Alison found that she had acquired a new friend, whether she wanted her or not.

A few days later, Alison discovered the exact apartment that she was seeking, and she found it down-town. It was nine blocks lower than the boarding house where they were stopping and, because of its location, was considerably cheaper than the unattractive up-town flats which she had so disliked. Even at that, it cost enough.

She could hardly wait to take her husband down to it. Fortunately he, too, approved.

It was in what had once been a large and beautiful dwelling. The street floor, which was an English basement, was now used as a shop, and the upper stories as lofts. The principal floor had been turned into an apartment; a doorway at the side of the shop entrance gave admission to it, and the one flight of stairs made an easy approach.

A magnificent living-room ran across the entire front; although its windows looked out only upon the high office buildings opposite, the windows themselves were large, and there were four of them. Alison could already imagine them curtained and

draped, and supporting window boxes on their broad outside ledges. But, even better than the windows and almost as good as the general size of the room, was the *pièce de résistance* — a big open fireplace at one end, with a delightful inglenook surrounding it.

The open fires at St. Mary's Rectory had been so much a matter of course, and winter evening life had so naturally clustered round them, that Alison had no idea how much they meant to her until she had contemplated replacing them with gas-logs or radiators. She had yet to learn the inconvenience of ashes; but even that inconvenience never offset the advantage, to her mind.

Back of the living-room and at right angles to it, lay an almost equally attractive dining-room, by the side of which ran the hall. The rest of the apartment consisted of a kitchenette, a pantry which might well have been called "a pantryette," a bathroom, a large bedroom, and two smaller rooms, one of which Alison planned to use for her husband's study and the other for a servant's room. And that was all. There was no guest-room and no storeroom, but you can't have everything. The size and beauty of the three principal rooms, the easy stairs, the sunniness and airiness, the fireplace, and the rent, all combined to make an almost ideal whole. They signed the lease that day.

Alison's own bedroom furniture was to be sent down from Coningsboro, together with several odd bits in the way of chairs, tables, and china. Her parents' wedding gift had been her table silver, a beautiful Oriental rug, and a cheque. Judge Howland had given a silver tea service, and Aunt Debbie

a clock. Coningsboro gifts had included lamps, pictures, silver, china, and glass. Alison's outfit of linen was complete. Aunt Juliette's thousand was untouched as yet. And there were still Phil's things to come.

These, on investigation, proved to be very disappointing. Only the books, a Morris chair, and a fairly presentable divan, were really fit to use.

The work of furnishing was delightfully interesting, although it meant a substantial slice off Alison's fund. Her natural taste and early associations combined in directing her toward the best. Then, too, the size of her rooms and their beautiful lines amply warranted proper treatment. So it was decided to buy furniture that would last a lifetime and adorn any possible future home. To Alison Howland it seemed more extravagant to spend a little money for something you didn't like and didn't want, than to spend considerable money for something you liked greatly.

When the servant question was definitely broached (Phil had successfully evaded it a number of times), there was a surprise awaiting the young wife. Her husband pointed out to her that, considering New York wages, a servant would be a very expensive luxury.

"But I have to have one, don't I?" demanded Alison. "I can afford to pay one, myself."

This was the first mention between them of her money. Judge Howland, however, had seen to it that she should know of the allowance he made his son, and the terms on which it would be continued.

"I think," answered Phil, rather evasively, "that

you will find other uses for your money. Twenty-five hundred a year is a mighty small income in New York."

"Twenty-five hundred? But that takes no account of what you make. That is all extra, isn't it? Anyhow, my father's salary is only two thousand."

"New York isn't Coningsboro, my dear child. And while your father's salary may be only two thousand, he doesn't pretend to live on it. He is a rich man. He must have at least four times two thousand. You didn't suppose that you lived on his salary, did you?"

"I don't know. I never thought anything about it. I remember now, though, that Father did tell me that he had an income of his own. How much have we to live on, Phil?"

"I have just told you; twenty-five hundred dollars." He avoided her eyes.

"But that is my income plus your father's allowance, without counting what you make. I don't suppose you asked me to marry you on your father's allowance, did you?"

"Certainly not. But can't you see that an author's income is, of necessity, uncertain? It is not like a salary. Editors and publishers pay when they please. Some magazines pay on acceptance, some on publication. Some are as slow as the devil. It is impossible to count definitely upon my income."

"Oh, I see," she cried. "We will have it, but we don't know just when, or just what it will be. Still, I think that won't matter. We'll soon learn to make some sort of an average and know what

we can afford. What was your idea about a servant, Phil?"

"Why look here, Al, you can boil eggs and toast bread, can't you? And make coffee? If you can't, I can."

"Of course I can."

"Well, that's all that is necessary. All that we shall want for breakfast will be fruit, cereal, toast, and coffee; eggs sometimes. For luncheon we'll simply picnic — fruit and jam and salads. There are delicatessen shops where you can buy cold roast fowls, and ham, and tongue, and even salads. Then there are tinned things and cheese. And every night we'll dine out and make a lark of it."

"I see," said the girl rather slowly. "That might be rather good fun for a while, but I should think we'd get awfully tired of it."

"Not at all. We'll go from place to place, and it will never be monotonous."

"What about bad nights?"

"You don't mind a bit of weather, do you?"

"And nights when we don't feel well?"

"Then we won't want to eat."

"What about dish-washing?"

"For just two of us, and two light meals each day? It will be child's play. The laundry will all be sent out. And the bread and rolls will come from the baker's. It will be a cinch.

"Who'll sweep and scrub?"

"Why, I don't know. I suppose there are charwomen that come by the day. Nine tenths of the people in New York live that way, Al."

It was a novel outlook to the girl. She wasn't

afraid of work, but she had not expected, as a bride, to provide more than half the combined income and then do the housework as well. That sort of idea had never occurred to her.

However, she had long since discovered that marriage produces many surprises. This was but one more added to the list.

Both the Shapleighs and the Howlands were forced to tarry longer than they had expected at the boarding-house in Twenty-eighth Street. There are always unforeseen delays when it comes to getting settled in new homes.

Mrs. Shapleigh was forever seeking Alison; lending her books, taking her driving, sending her flowers, and inviting her in for chats. Mrs. Shapleigh's room was a very large one at the head of the stairs, and it was quite a bower of *chaises longues* and blue satin covers and elaborate toilet appliances, to say nothing of dozens of photographs of its mistress, taken in every variety of costume and pose.

Alison hated always to be accepting and never returning, but she was given no choice.

One rainy morning she decided not to go out. About eleven o'clock there came a tap on her door. It was a hairdresser seeking to be directed to Mrs. Shapleigh's room.

Alison lunched alone and was told by the maid that Mrs. Shapleigh was not feeling well and had ordered a tray sent up to her. Returning to her own bedroom, it occurred to Alison that it might be the part of decency to go and make inquiries.

Her new acquaintance had been so exceedingly friendly.

She therefore went down the hall and tapped at Mrs. Shapleigh's door.

"Come in," called the voice of the owner.

She was in bed. The effect of the hairdresser's ministrations was amply apparent; the raven tresses, though still sleek and tightly bound, were gorgeously ondulé in flat shining waves. The room was heavy with the scent of gardenias, and the light was carefully shaded, but Alison was distinctly embarrassed, even in that dim light, at the very open Irish-laciness of her hostess' negligée.

They had talked perhaps half an hour, when the visitor, noticing a slight nervousness in her hostess' manner and perceiving her frequent glances at the clock, rose to go. At that moment, there was a knock at the door, and the rare color flew into Mrs. Shapleigh's face.

"It is my doctor, I imagine," she explained. "I have not been well and was forced to send for him."

Alison withdrew, and passed the arriving physician in the doorway. He was a fashionable-looking, carefully-groomed, blond man of about fifty.

It was a rather stupid afternoon to Alison, for the rain continued to pour until a quarter of six, when it suddenly stopped. She decided to run out for a breath of air before dinner. Just as she passed Mrs. Shapleigh's door, it opened, and out came the doctor.

"Good gracious," thought the girl, "what long calls they make in New York." And she said some-

thing of the same sort to her husband that night.

"In one way," she told him, "I don't think your busy New York is so awfully rushed."

When he heard what she meant, he first stared at her and then put back his head and roared.

The next evening at dinner, Mrs. Shapleigh announced that she was ordered to Atlantic City for a week. "My throat has been troubling me," she explained. "I fear you'll be gone when I return, dear Mrs. Howland. But I have your address, and we certainly shall not lose sight of each other."

CHAPTER II

At last the Howlands were settled in their new home, and the results of Alison's pains were amply justified. No more delightful *tête-à-tête* nest could have been found in all New York.

"Just right for two; just room enough for two," Phil kept repeating with such frequency that Alison wondered at his insistence. "No apartment can hold a family of more than two," he assured her.

The new life was odd, but interesting. The restaurant dinners came really to be the great events in the days of the young wife. They varied tremendously; sometimes Phil would insist on eating at one of the most expensive of the big hotels, saying that he "felt like it," and that he "had the price." At other times he and Alison contented themselves with thirty-five-cent meals at the cheapest of eating-houses, and it was apparent that Phil realized that economy was necessary. Alison wondered at the extremes that they struck; the same outlay could easily have been made to cover a more average and comfortable life — one with less exalted heights and less abysmal depths. But geniuses are admittedly mercurial.

The young bride explained affairs to herself on the theory that their finances depended on some editor paying up. Phil must be selling stories, or re-

ceiving pay for those already sold. But she wondered why he didn't show them to her, and why he discouraged discussion about them.

Then, too, where were such future windfalls to come from? To Alison's intense surprise, her husband didn't get down to work at all.

She had supposed that the moment they were settled he would begin a regular routine of daily writing in the cosy study on which she had spent so much thought and pains. But, not at all. Phil's habits were sufficiently erratic to warrant him a rank in the very highest row of geniuses.

He never rose till very late, and he slopped about all morning in pajamas and dressing gown — often with bare feet thrust into loose slippers, always with a cigarette hanging from his lips. Baths were not daily occurrences with him.

All this was horrible to the girl he had married. There never was a trigger, trimmer household than the one at St. Mary's Rectory. Every one there was as neat in the morning as the proverbial new pin. What made matters worse, Phil looked exceedingly unattractive in dishabille. Most men do; one wonders why, when it is becoming to so many women.

Thus Phil lounged through luncheon and the early afternoon. Then he sometimes went out and sometimes stayed in. Of course, he took Alison out to dinner and sat at home with her for an hour after their return. But he soon grew restless and, after wandering about a bit, took his hat and said he "guessed he'd go out." It was always "to see the fellows." Sometimes he was back at midnight,

sometimes not before three o'clock. His wife had her choice between an early bed, or a lonely evening with a book. When once she had discovered the resources of Phil's library, however, and the whereabouts of the public libraries, these evenings ceased being lonely.

Of course, it was different on theatre nights; they were quite frequent. Friends sent Phil tickets, and he and Alison always used them. On those occasions Phil would take his wife home after the performance, and then go out again alone.

The pieces at the theatres proved very instructive. Alison learned more about life from them than she had ever learned from her own mother. But the lesson was frequently presented in a distorted way that sickened her. She acquired the habit of begging off from those plays which were distasteful to her. Unfortunately these were invariably the ones that Phil liked best. He always pronounced them either "subtle" or "strong."

Nevertheless, the lure of the great city was beginning to make its appeal to Alison's quick sensibilities. She formed the habit of leaving Phil in bed or lolling around the house, while she wandered out to explore. The contrast between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue struck her as a marvel. First, the great avenue of luxury, of wonderful shops and sumptuously-clad wayfarers, of equipages, and restaurants where the price of a meal for two would be ample to feed many a family of six for a week. Then, but one block distant, the street of cheap shops and cheaper shoppers, with its roaring writhing demon of an elevated track, whose

trains thundered above the hurrying crowds and turned the place into bedlam.

Looking at the hatless Italian women on lower Sixth Avenue and in Washington Square, and at the foreign male faces in the seething noonday crowds, Alison began to wonder where the real native New Yorkers were to be found. Not in the Twenty-eighth Street boarding-house; its guests were all strangers to the city, and its landlady came from New Jersey. Not in the mobs that thronged the cheap streets. Not, judging from voice and accent, behind the counters in the big shops. She decided that one must enter their homes to find them.

She loved the park and the museums and libraries. Church, though she went every Sunday, always turned her heart heavy with homesickness. Not having a pew, she was forced to stand at the back until the service was well advanced. She was a stranger in a strange land, and she felt it; she, who had been the friend of every worshipper at St. Mary's.

It is a strange thing how a big city knows when Sunday comes. The streets look different; footsteps echo hollowly; every sight, every sound, makes the stranger within its gates realize his strangeness ten times more acutely. The Sabbath was made for homes, and homes for the Sabbath.

Before many weeks, Phil's friends began to drop into the apartment, and it didn't take them long to become habitués. Small wonder, either. It was a very different interior from those they had left behind them.

The Howlands' big living-room was charming —

comfortable, livable, appealing. Not a chair in it was uninviting, not a light was improperly placed or shaded. It was furnished but not cluttered, orderly but not stiff.

Most of the men who came to it came from shabby flats. Some of them kept house together; others had installed in their apartments blowsy be-wrappered slatterns who bloomed into costumes and rouge only when public appearance warranted such effort. Still others "shared expenses," with working girls, who went out early and came home late. It was not remarkable that these men flocked to the Howlands' delightful room, with its graceful, well-dressed hostess and her unfailing hospitality.

There were two things that began to trouble Alison seriously at this time; one was the permeating odor of stale tobacco smoke in which she lived, and the other was much more serious. It was the ease with which whisky came perpetually to flow in her home.

Once and once only did she voice her objections. Her husband's answer was to go out and get regularly drunk; he staggered in, during the wee small hours, to fall in a sodden heap in the living-room.

Alison had never before been near a drunken man; she hoped never to repeat the experience. It was the most disgusting and nauseating that she had ever lived through and, more than any other one thing, it disillusioned her. But it taught her a lesson; she learned that it was better to coax Phil to stay at home and to watch him, than to drive him out of her sight. She began to realize that though he was not yet a drunkard, he had the exact tempera-

ment to develop into one. Nagging, or trouble, or laziness, or discouragement, or any one of a dozen things might be the force that would give the final shove necessary to send him and his brilliant weakness tottering over the edge of the abyss. Truly, Alison Howland's education was progressing with marvellous rapidity.

Even after their house became a daily rendezvous, her husband continued to leave her in the late evenings. He either went "with the fellows," or to "see the fellows." But, though he returned late, he returned sober.

Phil's friends were a motley throng. Of them all, there were two who were the most constant visitors.

One of these was an attractive fellow named Ferriss. Alison could never quite understand his presence in the circle. He was well-born, well-connected, and rich. One would imagine him living in bachelor apartments with a Jap servant, and going out in the world of fashion. Phil was cultivating him assiduously, and evidently with the idea of grinding some future axe. Her husband's side, Alison could well understand. It was Ferriss' that puzzled her. "Art" was offered in explanation. But she wondered! It was certainly an art which left its votaries very free to dawdle and squander.

The Howlands' other constant visitor was Phil's most intimate friend; his name was Keppner—"Al" to his familiars. To him Alison took an immediate consuming dislike which, for Phil's sake, she tried her best to hide.

It was not only because of his physical appear-

ance, though that was certainly against him. He was fat, and bull-necked, and growing prematurely bald. His hands were horrible — pudgy cushions of flabby white flesh with stubbed finger ends. And his voice was raucous.

But quite apart from all this (Alison tried not to be influenced by externals) she hated his views. And she hated, without understanding them, certain of his glances which she sometimes caught, on looking up suddenly. Keppner's eyes were habitually carried half-shut, but they occasionally flashed on his pretty hostess a veiled gleam that made her hot and uncomfortable.

On the other hand, he was an undoubtedly brilliant man with a well-stored mind, a keen wit, and a ready tongue. He had read everything and written much. Under an assumed name, he was one of the best-known and most widely-quoted dramatic critics of the day. He was also the source of the Howlands' theatre tickets.

One of Alison's earliest discussions with him arose one evening when he quoted Nietzsche. Keppner, by the way, was an arrogant atheist.

"Nietzsche says," he began in his overbearing way, "that the Christian religion is the most immoral of creeds. It inculcates pity and tenderness, and thus enervates and feminizes its followers. Virility is the one desirable personal trait, increase of power and dominion the only national ideal; and Christianity undermines them both."

"He talks like a Turk, or a Mongolian," said Alison; "They are without compassion."

"Exactly. And they are right."

"Right?"

"Absolutely right."

Suddenly Alison realized how oriental was his own appearance; that his attitude towards women would be equally so, she felt sure.

Another time, they had a red-hot argument on the subject of freedom.

"Isn't this a free country?" demanded Keppner sneeringly. "And if it is, hasn't a man the right to free speech?"

"It is a free country," replied Alison, "certainly. But that fact doesn't give you the right to walk into a man's house and take his money, nor to abduct his wife, nor to corrupt the morals of his children. Those morals you should no more assail outside his house than under its roof, because a man's children are more valuable than his money. Therefore you have *not* a right to untrammeled freedom of speech."

"And where does my freedom come in?"

"Where no one but yourself is concerned. It does not permit you to cast falsely damaging aspersions on another's reputation, and it gives you the assurance that no one may cast any such on yours. You are protected by the same law that holds you in check."

"But if I think a thing, am I not free to say it?"

She shook her head.

"Not necessarily."

"Why not?"

"Because of others. If it were a necessary choice, wouldn't you rather think a bad thing than do it?"

"No; that is cowardice — the fear of punishment."

"It is not. It is the protection of others. Your evil thought can harm no one but yourself. Your evil act cannot possibly be so detached. Example, alone, would make it more far-reaching. Public decency is more important than personal freedom. I have often heard my father say that many people are unable to distinguish between freedom and license."

At that last word, she caught again that strange gleam from his eyes, the look that she so hated, and she pulled herself up short.

"I often tell Phil," continued Keppner, "that we are all too damned fair-minded. We are so afraid of not playing fair to the other fellow that we make ninnies of ourselves."

As he spoke, there flashed into Alison's mind the picture of a sunset beyond snowclad hills — of a man and a girl walking across a white expanse, the girl eagerly drinking, the while, the wisdom that flowed from her companion's lips. "Fair-mindedness," he had told her, "was the curse of the age." He had robed the thought in pretty garb, very different from Keppner's blunt language; he had expanded it into quite a theme. But apparently it wasn't his own. Still, we all get thoughts from others; that is, we get occasional ones. But it would be tragic if we never contributed to the general fund.

Phil's idle days drove his wife almost distracted. She would coax him into his study and up to his desk, she would cajole and entreat, but all to no end.

"Hang it all, Al, you can't force inspiration," he

always said fretfully, and the word held her up. Had he said "ideas" he would have been nearer to speaking the truth and she to understanding it; but it wouldn't have sounded so well. Supply Phil Howland with a framework of ideas, and no one could dress and adorn it more exquisitely than he. Words were his gift. But thoughts, unfortunately, were another matter. And he was deliberately choosing a sort of life that would not be likely to supply his deficiency. His wife could have supplied it amply, had she guessed its existence. Her busy brain was awhirl with ideas.

Phil did an occasional bit of unsigned hack writing, but it never made much of a hit. His critiques and reviews were always caustic and biting, but their animus gave the reader an impression of personal venom rather than of any warrant for it in the subjects that he attacked. It was as though a chronic dyspeptic should find fault first with the sun and then with the shade.

"Do you never praise, Phil?" asked his wife.

"When I find anything to praise," he answered surlily. "The classics, now —"

"Oh, yes, those of course. But I mean living writers. Do none of them please you?"

As a matter of fact, the thing that piqued him most was the success of his contemporaries. This was odd, considering his own two successes. As a rule, happiness can afford to be kind. But then, Phil Howland's hits had been made a number of years ago; he had done nothing since to follow them up.

He was very anxious to get a job like Keppner's and was sure he could adorn it. A certain big news-

paper syndicate had such a position in its giving, and the most important man in the syndicate was a friend of Ferriss'! This was the secret of the assiduity with which Phil cultivated Ferriss.

One day Alison said musingly: "Isn't it odd; I never speak to a woman, any more?"

Her husband threw her a queer quick look. "That is your own fault," he replied.

"My own fault? How?"

"Well, you have such stiff ideas. There are lots of nice girls that you might know."

"There are, of course, lots of nice girls in New York. But how could I know them?"

"Oh, I'm not speaking of the girls in what is known as 'Society.' They are all damned snobs. But if you weren't so all-fired particular, you could have all the women friends you wanted."

"Phil, what do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Take Ferriss, for instance; he has the sweetest little friend you ever saw —"

"Has her where?"

"In his apartment."

"In his *apartment?* What relation is she to him?"

"Don't be a fool, Al. The usual relation, of course."

After one incredulous moment, Alison understood. She couldn't fail to understand; her husband had purposely made his meaning so clear.

Without a word, she turned and went out of the room and into her bedroom. Putting on her wraps, she went into the street, and walked — walked feverishly, without a thought of where she was going.

So that was the sort of companionship proposed to her by her husband. He, her natural protector! Friendship with a class of women of whose existence she could no longer remain in ignorance! And it was men like that whom he went out to see, night after night! A pleasant circle, truly!

Gertrude and her husband were due in New York in late November, just in time to get them back to Coningsboro for Thanksgiving. Alison was to meet them at the pier, and to lunch with them before they left town. No word was said of Phil accompanying her, but she understood that, and so did he.

The two sisters almost fell into each other's arms. Gertrude and Kenneth were the pictures of happiness; they had spent a perfect summer, and were more in love with each other than ever.

"Oh, Allie," said Mrs. Rawle, when her husband had left them to attend to the luggage, "there never was any one in the world like him. You know how I used to care for money, and clothes, and things like that? Well, dear, if Kenneth hadn't a penny, it would be just the same to me. I'd follow him anywhere; I'd leave the whole world to be with him; I'd crawl on my hands and knees, to the end of the earth, if necessary, to get to him. Oh, dearest, isn't love wonderful?"

"Isn't it?" said Alison.

Gertrude looked at her quickly.

"Allie," she said, "you're happy, aren't you? Tell me the truth. Is it all right?"

"Certainly it's 'all right,' you foolish child. I was never capable of rhapsodies, you know. And,

of course, one has to get adjusted. In a new life there are always some shocks."

Gertrude's heart turned cold. When one is happy, one isn't likely to speak unconsciously of new experiences as "shocks." A nasty little fear crept into her mind, but just then Kenneth, the incomparable, returned, and they hurried off to the motor.

At luncheon there was so much to tell and to ask that the time flew. Europe was wonderful. Alison must certainly see it. Gertrude dashed from name to name, each one suggesting another.

"Wouldn't she love Paris, Ken, and London? But I think you'd like Paris better, Allie; I did. It's so gay and sparkling, and every one seems so happy and vivacious. London is impressive and wonderful, but it is so much more serious. It's grayer. And then the smaller cities — I loved Bruges better than any of the others. But *Switzerland* would simply drive you crazy! You must see it! No pictures can give you any idea of that scenery. I longed for you at each new town! Lucerne was simply heavenly, wasn't it, Ken? Mustn't Allie see it soon?" And so she rattled on.

"What about Aunt Juliette?" asked Alison.

"Oh, she's wonderful. A *mondaine* to her finger-tips. She loaded me with presents and sent you and Elsa each a trinket; I'll send yours after I get home. Aunt Juliette is over sixty, you know, but she is still courted, and fêted, and even made love to. And she demands it, absolutely. She couldn't live without it. Her house is a perfect palace. You must see it some day."

"And she agrees with me that I have found the

most wonderful treasure in the world," interrupted Rawle.

Gertrude looked at him with her heart in her eyes, and blushed. Actually blushed at his praise after half a year of married life! Alison's eyes grew tender and wistful as she watched them.

Gertrude was swathed in sables, and her fingers flashed with gems; but it was easy to see that they made the least of her happiness.

Alison bade them good-bye with tear-wet lashes. She loaded them with loving messages for Coningsboro and its dwellers.

Her own Thanksgiving dinner was eaten at a hotel, where decorations and music strove to replace home ties. It was a vain mockery. The holiday spirit is not purchasable.

Although Gertrude's short visit was never mentioned between the Howlands, the knowledge of it rankled with Phil. His own break with Rawle aside, he knew well that, in their heart of hearts, none of the Terrys liked him. Disapproval always stung him; he wanted to kick back.

"I suppose you'd enjoy traveling," he said to his wife one day.

"Better than anything in the world," she answered. "I long for it. You know I've scarcely done any of it."

"Naturally. Your parents are not unique. They have every reason for sticking to Coningsboro. Most persons would rather patronize their inferiors than be snubbed by their superiors."

"Superiors?" flamed Alison. "What do you mean by that? My parents have no superiors."

"Really? I congratulate them," and he dropped the subject with a smile of sarcasm.

That very afternoon brought an invitation from Alison's cousin, Mrs. Bleecker Gansevoort. She wrote that she had been intending to hunt up the Howlands, but had so far been prevented. As she was so much older than they, and a relation as well, wouldn't they waive ceremony and dine at her house the following Friday, at eight o'clock?

Alison was delighted. She felt that she would once more be among persons of her own class, and she knew that her mother would welcome news of "Cousin Mary," whom she had not seen for years.

Phil, on the other hand, pretended to be bored at the thought of the dinner; but his wife was almost sure that that was a pose. He showed a surprising concern about his clothes. Should he wear a dinner-jacket or a "tail-coat?" A white tie or a black? Did Al think that silk waistcoat looked fresh enough? And so on.

He insisted on a carriage, though the distance was slight, and the night clear and balmy.

"I'm not going to have those damned flunkeys looking down their noses at me," he explained.

The damned flunkeys would have been warranted in their imaginary superciliousness, as Alison presently discovered. They served in a very gorgeous establishment. The moment the Howlands entered its portal, Phil began to be self-conscious. He was afraid both that he might do something awkward, and that he might not be properly appreciated. In a word, he was out of his element, and he knew it.

As a matter of fact, his tall stooping slouch and

hectic personality had never appeared to less advantage than in that drawing-room. Alison, on the other hand, fitted perfectly into the picture. It was natural that she should. She felt more at home than she had felt since leaving Coningsboro.

Mrs. Gansevoort greeted her warmly.

"Just think how long it has been since I have seen you," she exclaimed. "Not since you were a little girl of seven. I am so anxious to hear all about your dear mother. . . . And here are some other cousins whom you don't even know. Bleecker, this is the 'little Alison' of whom I have been telling you. And this, my dear, is your husband, I suppose? Mr. Howland, Mr. Gansevoort. This, Alison, is your cousin Kathleen, and this is my son-in-law, Mr. Mortimer. Kathleen, may I present Mr. Howland? Mr. Howland, Mr. Mortimer. We are just a family party to-night. I thought it would be so much nicer to have time to get really acquainted, than to bother with a lot of outsiders."

This, of course, was only partially true. Mrs. Gansevoort was much too clever to risk unsuccessful parties. She knew that Elizabeth Terry's daughter would be entirely "all right"; the moment she saw the girl, she knew it doubly. But her cousin's letter had made Mrs. Gansevoort wonder a bit about the new son-in-law; the moment she saw him she wondered no more. She knew.

Although it was a family party, it was a beautiful one. Alison, seated between her host and his son-in-law, was perfectly happy. It was long since she had felt so carefree.

"Do you know," she said to Mr. Gansevoort, "I

believe you are the first real New Yorker to whom I have ever spoken."

"And I," he laughed, "was born in Albany and lived there till I was grown up. Your cousin Mary, as you know, was a Baltimorean, and Kathleen was born in England. Billy, you can claim New York birth, can't you?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Mortimer; "turn your gaze on me, Mrs. Howland, for I am the *rara avis* whom you seek."

At this moment Alison heard Mrs. Gansevoort say: "Are you in business in New York, Mr. Howland?"

"I am a writer," he answered curtly. His wife knew from his voice that the question had piqued him.

"Of course," replied their hostess quickly, "how stupid of me to have forgotten." But her unfortunate ignorance had fanned Phil's slumbering resentment into flame. He was in one of those moods that made him take exception to anything that was said; he disagreed with every one; he was entirely conscious of the unpleasant impression he was making, and he proceeded to justify it by every means in his power, and then to resent it. He announced himself as a socialist, an agnostic, and a Bohemian. And he drank as much champagne as all the rest of the guests put together.

The other members of the party being what they were, Phil's bald gibes were smoothly received, and the conversation continued to flow without a ripple. But Alison's pleasure was ruined. She could no longer give herself up to her own enjoyment; she

was forced to keep her mind on her husband and to try to palliate his lapses.

However, a number of charming things were the outcome of that dinner. The one that most pleased Alison was that Cousin Mary begged her to make use of the Gansevoort pew at St. Timothy's.

"I'm afraid you'll have it all to yourself, my dear. We have grown to be shockingly careless churchgoers. Your Cousin Bleecker and I almost always go out to the country-place for the week-ends. And these bad children of mine are golf-mad; they spend every Sunday at some Country Club. But it is a beautiful service at St. Timothy's, and you will do me a favor by making use of the pew. I am ashamed to think how seldom it is occupied."

"Salvation by proxy," laughed Mrs. Mortimer. "Are you fond of music, Alison?"

"Oh, devotedly. I have never heard much good music, though."

"Well, Billy and I are savages. But truthful savages, you know. We abhor everything but ragtime. We go to the Opera in the evenings because one has to. But if you'll use our box for the afternoon performances, you will do me a charity. And I have some Symphony Concert seats that I shall be only too glad to get rid of."

Nor was this all. Countless times, that winter, were the Gansevoort and Mortimer carriages and motors put at Alison's disposal. Frequent invitations did she receive to both houses; but always to luncheon, or tea, and always alone.

"How *could* she?" was the only comment of Alison's cousins, after her departure.

The evening's aftermath was much more uncomfortable on the Howlands' side. It was introduced by Phil and conducted entirely by him. But because of it, his wife cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER III

ONE evening Keppner dropped in with an invitation. Would the Howlands dine with him in Chinatown some time next week?

Alison was immediately interested. She had heard much of Chinatown, and this would be her first peep at it. Although Keppner was not just the host that she would have chosen, he was the companion who always best suited Phil.

When the evening arrived, Keppner called for his guests at their apartment, and they all walked over, in the December twilight, to the Third Avenue elevated, Mott Street being their ultimate destination.

As they left the car, Alison gazed around her on a curious scene. Not for a moment would she have imagined herself in New York! Not even in America! The narrow ill-kept streets ran together in a strange jumble of angles and corners. Only in front of the principal buildings were they well lighted. Second-story balconies reached far out over the sidewalks. Restaurants and shops crowded each other, and the shop-windows were curious to behold. China, slippers, fans, coats, and crêpes filled some of them, while others displayed tea, wheat-sprouts, dried fish, and strange-looking ducks, split up the back and flattened.

But it was the human element that held Alison Howland's attention. She saw nothing but men and

boys — not a single woman, either native or white. The males ranged from the pure-blooded Chinese with slippered feet and coiled queues, on through every grade of half-breed and quarter-breed, down to pasty almond-eyed children who were almost white. The rugged tan of visiting sailors looked half Ethiopian, in contrast. These sailors were sober, drunk, or half-seas-over, as the case might be, and they were there to make a night of it.

Keppner conducted his guests to a bright blue restaurant with an Oriental name and smell. In the second story they sat down to a meal that began with the dessert and ran backwards to the soup. To Alison, the first course was the best; it was preserved kumquats, golden and delicious. She ate sparingly of chop-suey and yako-main; unsweetened tea in handleless cups was the sole beverage. Noiseless, expressionless, native waiters served them. At Keppner's order and upon the payment of a certain fee, an elaborate mechanical toy was set in motion. It stood encased in glass in the center of the room, and its exploitation was accompanied by weird music.

Keppner and Phil talked freely, during the waiter's absences, of the life in the place. Alison heard of women, white women many of them, who were shut up in the back of those houses, and who never saw daylight from year's end to year's end. Stretched on cushions, decked and painted like dolls, drugged with opium, they simply lay there, the chattels of their lords and masters. Life, beautiful throbbing life, never touched them. It was hideous to imagine.

After they had finished their meal and pottered round among the shops awhile, the trio went back home, and Keppner came in for a drink and a chat.

"Those oriental faces never fail to haunt me after I have watched them," he said. "They are veritable masks. Not a flicker of expression ever crosses them."

"Yes," echoed Alison, "it is horrible, isn't it?"

"Horrible? It is wonderful. It is the height of self-control. In that, they are simply centuries ahead of us."

"Ahead of us? Creatures who keep themselves looking like corpses? Who never permit a natural ray of life to appear on the surface? They, ahead of us?"

"Certainly. That is their armor. Why should they lay their minds bare to the public gaze? Whose business, but their own, are their feelings? Stoicism is admirable, is it not?"

"But why should we seek to mask all our feelings? They are not to our discredit."

"Not to our discredit to own. Very much to our discredit to show. That is weakness. Also it puts us at the mercy of others."

"Nonsense!"

"Nothing of the sort. The face of every adult human being is a mask — more or less successful. We Occidentals are babes compared with the Orientals. But take our highest examples, and you will find that they all approach the Eastern standard. Can you imagine any great diplomat betraying his feelings by his facial expression? Not he; he is far too clever. Children's faces, on the other hand,

always reflect every passing emotion. It is because their owners have not yet learned life's greatest lesson. With years, they acquire it. Not always in the same degree, but according to their sophistication and their self-control."

Alison, with her natural hatred of hypocrisy, hotly repudiated this idea.

"I don't agree with you in the least," she exclaimed. "Why should our faces be masks? Only unworthy emotions need to be hidden. What is more beautiful than the expression of a mother bending over her child, her face transfigured by love? What is more subtle than a message conveyed from eye to eye, without the necessity of spoken words? I cannot imagine anything more horrible than keeping a constant watch over yourself, thinking of yourself every moment, repressing all natural emotion, and assuming an everlasting mask. And to see that sort of thing whenever you look around you, would be like putting out your hand in the dark, hoping to meet an answering clasp, and grasping instead a cold clammy dead hand."

Keppner smiled cynically at her intensity.

"And you, yourself, make no endeavor to wear a mask?" he asked smoothly.

"Certainly not." As she answered, Alison was suddenly aware that he had formulated one of the reasons for her dislike of him. He did wear a mask.

Keppner was looking at her from under his half-closed lids. He spoke very slowly as he said:

"Then I am to understand that you would be perfectly willing that I should read in your face ex-

actly what you are thinking of me at this moment? What you have often thought of me, since I first met you? What you think of —" here he deliberately inclined his head toward her husband and paused, then continued —" of many of us, who visit you here?"

Alison's face flamed. But she stuck to her guns. She determined to answer him as boldly as he deserved, in spite of the fact that he was a guest beneath her roof.

" If you imagine that you have read any secret feelings I may have about you," she replied steadily, " does not that amply prove my contention that I do not wear a mask?"

Keppner shook his head.

" No. Only that you do not wear it skilfully — as yet. You have no strong natural gift for masks, and your need for one is of recent birth. But you are learning. And, as you are an apt pupil at anything you undertake seriously, you will soon be an expert."

Here Phil broke in. He was bored with this talk about masks.

" Al," he said, " no, not you " (as his wife looked round), " Al Keppner, I mean. See here, I'm all-fired anxious to land a job like yours. Can't you give me a push somewhere?"

" Ferriss is your man for that. Get him to say a good word to his friend, Maxon. Maxon has that syndicate in the hollow of his hand. Push that decanter over here, will you, old man?"

Alison Howland awoke the next morning with the

feeling that some disaster had befallen her. Then, with returning consciousness, came relief. Nothing had happened, after all. It was simply the reflex of that horrible trip to Chinatown and that unpleasant conversation with Keppner, about masks. She had been dreaming all night about both of them.

And she continued to be haunted by both of them all day. Do what she might, she could not throw off the obsession.

Taking the subject of masks, she ran over all the people she knew, trying to see if they were fitted with this armor of the sophisticated. For that was what Keppner had said: masks were the inevitable mark of sophistication.

Did her father and mother wear them? No, she was sure that they didn't.

Did Gertrude and Elsa? And to her immense astonishment, the immediate intuitive reply was "yes." Perhaps not now, in their own homes. But certainly at the rectory they had taken care not to reveal all that they felt.

Did Judge Howland wear a mask? Poor old soul, he emphatically did. A repellent one.

One by one, she ran over the Coningsboro list, until it occurred to her that it was hardly a fair test. Coningsboro could not really be called sophisticated. Yet even there, and by the light of enlarged experience, she had discovered mask upon mask.

In New York, she knew scarcely any one; nevertheless, she had already encountered masks. Look at Keppner! Look at Ferriss, with his trumped-up excuse of "Art" to cover his irregular ménage! Possibly every man who came to her house wore a

mask in her presence. It was a hateful, uncomfortable, disconcerting thought. She wished that it had never been suggested to her.

Her thoughts flew to Chinatown and then to the various phases of life in the many-sided city which had come to be her home. The longer she thought, the more stupendous it all seemed. There, in places like Coningsboro, people passed whole lifetimes without even glimpsing any other side of things. And suddenly Alison became aware that, with all her present loneliness, and her homesickness, and her heartaches, she could never again be happy with as contracted a horizon as that which had encompassed her childhood and maidenhood. The call of life had wooed her, and she had yielded to its spell.

She longed to talk it over with some intimate friend. That opportunity lacking, she went out and bought three good-sized blank books. Returning with them, she carried a table, a chair and a pot of ink into the little unused room which she had purposed to assign to the servant who had never materialized. Turning the key in the door of this room, Alison Howland sat down and lost herself. And when she came to life again, it was nearly three hours later.

That night, after their return from the restaurant dinner and before any of the men had come in, Alison suddenly said to her husband: "Phil, describe Chinatown."

"Describe it?"

"Yes. Suppose you were trying to paint a picture of it to a person who had never seen it; how would you do it?"

Immediately interested by so easy and congenial a task, her husband began. With his usual exquisite skill, he caught every high-light, every depth, every half-tone, and contrast; and to each was given the exact word, the precise phrase, that best fitted it.

Alison leaned forward, drinking in each syllable. The next morning, she compared her husband's description with the one she herself had already written. Needless to say, hers was entirely outclassed.

She took a loose leaf and wrote Phil's sentences as nearly as she could remember them. Then she measured them against her own and tried to classify the points of difference in the two word-pictures.

After this, it became one of their pet pastimes to play what they called Alison's "game." She would invariably suggest the subject; Phil would never fail to give it an exquisite dress.

About this time there arrived, one day, Aunt Juliette's gift to Alison. It was a beautiful platinum pendant set with small diamonds and one sapphire of quite good size.

Alison was pleased, of course, but not to the extent that most girls of her age would have been pleased. She knew little of gems, and the money value of a thing meant nothing to her, except when she was buying it. Cheap imitation jewelry she abhorred. She liked jewels, rather than jewelry, but she liked them from a purely artistic standpoint. A pendant of wrought gold, entirely bare of gems, would have given her as much pleasure, provided it were just as delicate and fine.

Not so Phil. He was greatly interested in the new bauble.

"How much do you suppose it is worth?" he asked.

"Why, Phil, what a question! I haven't the remotest idea."

"Hundreds or thousands?" he persisted.

"Not thousands, certainly, I should hope. Perhaps hundreds, perhaps tens."

"Have you ever seen your aunt?"

"Never."

"How old is she?"

"Gertrude says she is over sixty. I was astonished to hear it, but of course, she must be. I have always been told that she was twelve years older than my father."

"Has she children?"

"No. Her only child, a little daughter, died when she was quite tiny."

"And your aunt is very rich?"

"Fabulously, I believe," answered Alison ironically. "But I should think it might make small difference to us."

"Under certain circumstances, I should think it might make quite a bit. I suppose Gertrude coddled up to her to beat the band. That's just like Gertrude."

"It is not in the least like her, as you should know."

The sharpness of her voice struck the man. He didn't want to quarrel with her.

"Oh, cut the heroics, Al," he said good-naturedly, "I only meant that Gertrude was lucky. She always strikes the soft snaps. I tell you what let's do. Let's save up for a trip to Europe."

"Oh, Phil," she cried ecstatically, "could we possibly, do you think? I'd rather do it than anything in the world. How much would it cost? We could go on a cheap boat and stop in inexpensive lodgings? Do you think we could manage it in a year or two?"

From that moment, the dream never left her. She began to save even carfare and to walk everywhere. She made a point of declining the proffered Gansevoort carriages and motors, because acceptance entailed tips.

Saying nothing about it to her husband, she got a pasteboard box and cut a slit in its lid. Then, tying it up with ribbons, she hid it under a pile of lingerie in her bureau drawer. And into it she began to slip every coin and small bill that she could possibly spare.

She did not draw on her wedding-fund for this purpose. That fund had marvellously shrunken from fifteen hundred dollars to six hundred. It reminded Alison of Balzac's famous "*peau de chagrin*," so fast did it dwindle. She had, in return, however, a well and adequately furnished apartment.

The folly of robbing Peter to pay Paul being apparent, Alison kept her six hundred in the bank, against future needs. But into her savings-box she slid all the small dribs that she could shave off the daily living-expenses.

To Phil, unfortunately, "saving up" meant humoring himself to the extent of spending every available penny, and then living in the hope of some lucky windfall. Big funds Phil might possibly be able to hoard; as he had never had the chance to try, it is

charitable to permit him the benefit of the doubt. But small sums had had repeated opportunities to speak for themselves. They simply ran through his fingers like water.

It was the same with everything; not only money testified to his method; health, natural endowments, time, all were prodigally squandered until some future miracle became the sole hope. That is the result of being "artistic" instead of practical, "temperamental" instead of logical. What an odd world this would be if every one allowed his temperament to lead him by the nose!

CHAPTER IV

THE approach of Christmas saddened Alison. How could it fail to? It was the first Christmas she had ever spent away from home.

Her mind turned back to Coningsboro, with its clean snowstorms, its innocent mysteries, its busy preparations for Christmas-trees in church and home, and its excitement over the New Year's Eve "Assembly." Elsa and Gertrude were to be the "bride patronesses." Gertrude would probably be resplendent in some wonderful French creation. And what a Christmas she would have! Unlimited money to spend, two adoring step-children on whom to shower gifts, a husband who was convinced that the sun rose and set in her eyes, and all her loved ones, save one, around her. "But she'll miss me," Alison assured herself. "There won't be a minute of the day when she isn't thinking of me, nor one when I'm not thinking of her, bless her dear heart!"

But one short year from last Christmas, and it seemed an eternity! Alison remembered the merry sleighing-party out to Rawle's farm, to dress that elaborate tree for his sleeping tots. She remembered the happy day that ensued: the glad Christmas greetings called all over the house, the squeals and exclamations of delight at the various gifts, and the beautiful Christmas service in the old, dimly-lit odorous church; then the Christmas dinner, over

which Delia and Ellen had labored with such pains; the short afternoon; and the jolly game-filled evening!

How different would be her day this year! She might awaken Phil with a "Merry Christmas," but the chances were that she would slip out quietly to an early service, leaving him in bed, and that the only morning sounds in their home would be the muffled ones of her quiet toilet.

A year? A lifetime! Hadn't she and Gertrude both found their mates? Hadn't all three of the Terry girls fared out to meet their fate? Hadn't they discovered the difference between real life and that happy innocent conception of it that they used to consider so wise? Didn't the old rectory, which had sheltered them during all the years that they could remember, now echo lonesomely to measured middle-aged steps? Where were the dancing feet, the girlish laughter, the youthful problems that once seemed so ponderous and important?

To think of it! She, and Elsa, and Gertrude, and their parents, would all awaken in different homes! The day would already be quite old before the rest of them could greet each other with Christmas kisses, and she, Alison, would forfeit hers entirely.

In New York, the shops and streets all wore Christmas garb, but the only Christmas spirit that was evident was the extra spirit of rush and tear. Counters could hardly be approached, because of the pressing throngs. Patient shopgirls looked fagged to death. Women's voices were strained and snappy. Poor children and cripples begged everywhere for contributions for Christmas boxes.

And the tinkling tambourines of Salvation Army girls called for remembrance of the Christmas poor.

It was safe to say that in Coningsboro not one soul would fail to have a real Christmas. It was probably safe to say that in New York, Christmas would mean nothing at all to two thirds of its dwellers.

Alison's gifts had all been despatched in due season. And as the corresponding home packages reached her, she put them carefully away, not to be uncovered until Christmas day dawned.

But on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, a large wooden box arrived, and it was marked "to be opened immediately."

Lacking proper tools, Alison and Phil labored over it for some time before they succeeded in prying off its lid. Then, as Alison unpacked the contents, the tears rained down her face.

"Look, Phil," she cried, and her voice shook, "Look, oh, look, what those dear people have done! The darlings! The blessings! They wanted to feel that we came as near as possible to having our Christmas dinner with them!"

The roast turkey was marked "from Mother"; a bottle of old port "from Father"; some mince and pumpkin pies "from Delia"; a black fruit cake "from Ellen"; a lot of hothouse fruit, including some wonderful black Hamburg grapes, "from Gertrude and Kenneth"; and a box of beautiful bonbons "from Elsa and Roscoe."

Not even the home gifts, still lying in their wrappers, could touch the far-away member of the family circle as did this box of goodies. It was the spirit

of it that brought her tears, the intimacy, the old-fashioned homeyness.

"Do you believe that any one else in the city has had a gift like that?" she asked. "A remembrance from every soul that ever lived under the home roof? I don't. Let them keep their gems and their furs and their motors! I'd rather have this box than anything in the world. Oh, Phil, now we'll eat our Christmas dinner at home instead of in a restaurant, won't we?"

As a matter of fact, as the winter wore on, the restaurant meals came to pall considerably on the girl. Their novelty was gone and their sameness was wearing. Although served in different establishments and listed under various fancy names, everything came to taste alike. The trouble was in the lack of home cooking and seasoning; no amount of garnishing ever gave a joint the same flavor as constant and careful "basting"; no fowls had the juicy flesh of the milk-fattened home-killed chickens at the rectory; no omelettes were as puffy and as tempting as those that Delia turned out.

The weather, too, grew more uncertain. There were many stormy nights when no meal would have coaxed the girl away from her fireside and into stormcoat and overshoes.

She began to bring in steaks and chops and oysters, and to practice cooking them at home for the evening meal; and the innovation proved an attractive one.

One snowy day, she had taken her outing in the morning, and had come in at luncheon time rosy and exhilarated. Wet skirts and shoes had neces-

sitated a change into house gown and slippers and, that made, Alison began to feel that it would be very cozy not to be obliged to face the weather again.

She curled herself up with a book, in a big chair near the window, and gave herself over to the dreamy delight of watching the ever thickening snowflakes, and just thinking.

About four o'clock, Phil began to struggle into his great coat.

"Oh, Phil," said his wife, looking up, "are you going out?"

"Yes, I have to. Why? Do you want anything?"

"Indeed I do. I want to dine at home to-night. Would you mind bringing in a nice juicy steak? You won't have to carry it far."

"All right. It would be better than going out. Anything else you want?"

"No. We have all that we need. Be sure to make them give you a good cut; a thick one, you know."

"I will. I may not be back till nearly seven, Al."

"That's all right. It doesn't take long to cook a steak. I'll have everything else ready."

He stooped over and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"You look mighty sweet," he said, with one of his rare compliments. "Your walk has given you a wonderful color, and your hair is so pretty." He touched it lightly as he spoke. His wife was nearly as much surprised as she would have been if

he had struck her. Of late, he had always taken her good looks for granted.

After he had gone, she fell to wondering whether it could possibly be her own fault that his praises were so rare. Would another woman, in her place, have been able to elicit them more often?

She was deep in her reverie when the tinkle of the doorbell broke in on it. It was not a welcome sound. She was having a lovely time all to herself.

Phil's friends were liable to appear any time after three o'clock in the afternoon. Their mornings were apparently given to rest or to work. But by three o'clock they began to wander, and they kept it up most of the night.

Alison went to the door, and faced Keppner.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "what a pity! Phil has just gone out. Fifteen minutes earlier, and you would have caught him!"

"Really?" replied the man. "Well, perhaps you will let me come in just the same. The storm is simply wild, and your fire looks very inviting."

She didn't want him at all. There was no one that she wanted less. But there was no help for it, so she bade him welcome with what warmth she could muster.

Although she sat down, he did not. He divested himself of his wraps and began to wander nervously around the room, responding rather abstractedly to her remarks. Invited to smoke, he declined, and conversation was in a fair way of languishing.

The day was darkening fast, and the shadows threw the firelight into stronger relief. Keppner

eventually paused in his restless march, and stood near one of the windows.

"Come here a minute," he said, and his voice sounded odd to her ears.

"What is it?" she asked, without moving.

"Something in the street that I want to show you," he responded.

Without a second thought, she rose and crossed to his side.

The moment she was near him, he turned and grabbed her — there was no other word for it — and folded her in his arms as in a vise. Her strength was nothing against his, and he was apparently deaf to her startled cry. Held by those horrible arms, clasped to that horrible body, she was as powerless as a baby. Her struggles were of less avail than those of a fly in the enmeshing web.

She couldn't scream — it would be useless. There was no one to hear her. She was alone in the house with this loathsome beast. What was he going to do?

She had no hope except the force of her will. If that failed her, there was nothing else.

"If you dare to hurt me," she said wildly, "if you dare to raise a finger to harm me, I swear to you that I will tell my husband everything, the moment he comes in. Take your arms away; let me go! You are a brute, a beast! Let go of me at once!"

He seemed not even to hear her. Releasing one hand, he passed it rapidly and repeatedly over her body, holding her close the while, and swaying back-

wards and forwards with her in his arms. From first to last, he spoke never a word. Only his breath came audibly, and he inhaled deeply.

The girl was conscious of no detail at the moment, but afterwards she remembered every slightest one with sickening clearness. Her companion's eyes were closed, his nostrils swelled and sank like the flanks of a panting animal, his face was deathlike, oriental, horrible. His mask had fallen.

After what seemed like an eternity, his grasp slackened and, with a sudden twist, she wrested herself free. Fleet as a hunted animal, she flew to her bedroom and turned the key in the lock. She was safe!

Safe, but polluted! She felt as if she would never again be clean, never again decent nor innocent. As she paced up and down her room, her nails broke the skin of her palms, and she fell to weeping, and then to shaking as though in an ague.

She heard no sound in the rest of the house until, after some twenty minutes, the front door banged. But she wouldn't go out. It might be a trap. Never would she unlock that door until her husband spoke to her through it.

At the thought of Phil, her mind started off in another direction. She must tell him; she must confess (although she was innocent); she must have him forbid Keppner the house! And at the very moment that she was making these vehement protestations, she knew that what she wanted to do was impossible. Intuitively, she realized that Phil would never give her credit for her clean-handedness; he would say that no man could so outrage

a woman unless she had given him cause. He would side with his filthy friend against his own wife, and he would continue to punish her for a thing she had not done, and to suspect her forever of attempting to repeat it. She knew he would! And she was right. By the time an hour had passed, she had wisely decided to lock the vile secret within her own heart.

There was a small bouquet of fresh violets in the room. Using the water in the vase, she bathed her eyes and carefully powdered their reddened lids. By the time she heard her husband's voice, she was fairly mistress of herself.

"Why in thunder is the place so dark?" he asked irritably. "Here I am barking my shins on half a dozen chairs. Have you been asleep?"

"No," she replied. "But I have been in my room, resting."

Her voice was not quite natural. He looked at her curiously as the light flashed on.

"What is the matter with your eyes?" he asked roughly.

"I have been crying," she answered as steadily as she could. "And if you talk about it, I shall probably begin again. I am only a woman; and I don't treat you to many tears."

"Well, cut it out," he growled. "If there's one thing I despise more than another, it's a hysterical female. Here's your steak."

The work of preparing the meal helped Alison to regain her self-control. She wasn't hungry, and she ate next to nothing, but the crisis was passed.

About half-past eight, there was a ring, and Phil

answered it. Alison could hear his voice in greeting: "Hello, old man; glad to see you. Come on in!" And presently he returned to the room with — Keppner!

Alison could scarcely believe her own eyes. She had supposed that Keppner would certainly absent himself for a long time — possibly that he would never again cross their threshold. And here he was back again, in three hours!

After the first shocked glance, she never looked at him again, and never addressed him. This was not as noticeable as might be supposed, because Phil and his guest were both talking volubly, pouring drinks, lighting cigarettes, selecting chairs, and so on.

The moment Keppner sat down, Alison rose and left the room. Finding that she did not return, her husband came to seek her, at the end of an hour or so.

"What are you doing, Al?"

"Writing. Do you want me?"

"Not especially. But Keppner wants to know what night next week we will dine with him at Delmonico's."

Of all the incredible impertinence! Alison braced herself for the coming struggle.

"I will not go at all," she said quietly.

"You won't go? Why, of course you will. What is the matter with you to-night, anyhow?"

"Don't raise your voice, Phil. It will do no good. And our disagreements are no one's else affair. Look me straight in the eyes . . . straight. There. Now listen! I . . . won't . . . go . . .

anywhere . . . with . . . Mr. Keppner . . . either . . . now . . . or . . . at . . . any . . . other time! Is that quite plain?"

"Damn you," he snarled angrily, "damn you! I shan't carry that message. You can do it yourself."

"Very well, I will." Walking straight into the living-room, she stood near the door and turned her face towards Keppner. She looked at him squarely.

"My husband, Mr. Keppner, has delivered your invitation. It will be impossible for me to accept it, either now or at any other time."

And she walked back to her bedroom.

She was furious. To think of that beast seeking to compromise her pride by trapping her into accepting his hospitality! Not much!

After quite a long time, she heard the sounds of Keppner's departure, and her husband's voice saying:

"No. I won't come with you now. I'll join you in less than an hour. Good night, old man. Come soon again."

This last, his wife well knew, was a challenge to her.

Presently the door closed, and her husband's footsteps approached the bedroom. He entered, and stood looking at her as if he could kill her.

"Now then, you—" he thundered (and the word that he used was one that she had never heard), "now then! There is no one to overhear us. Perhaps you will deign to explain to me by what right you insult my friend in my house!"

"Your house?"

"Yes, my house, by —! What do you mean by such behavior?"

"Phil, be quiet. You cannot intimidate me. Stop a moment and reflect whether it would pay you to force me to leave 'your' house. When I do, every penny of your income ceases, as you very well know. As to Mr. Keppner, he issued an invitation, not a royal command. An invitation may be accepted or declined, at will. His will always be declined, when extended to me."

"You are a damned snob! You are afraid to be seen with him in public."

"I have been seen with him in public. Didn't I go to Chinatown with him?"

"That's just it! You'll sneak down there and let him spend money on you, because you know that no one will see you. But when it comes to going to a fashionable restaurant, you're afraid, you poor snivelling snob! Afraid of his race, just like all the rest of the damned so-called Christians that I have ever seen."

"Phil Howland, if you don't stop swearing, I will leave this house and go to a hotel. And tomorrow I'll return to Coningsboro. What do you mean by Mr. Keppner's 'race'? Isn't he of the same race as we?"

"Sweet Miss Innocence," he sneered. "Don't try that game on me. It won't work. You know as well as I do about Keppner's race."

"I do not."

"That is a lie!"

The girl rose, as white as death. Never before, in her whole life, had she been accused of lying.

"Philippse Howland," she said, "look at me! If you ever speak to me again, in that way, I swear that you shall regret it. There is no other question between us now — simply that! I will not be spoken to, as you have just spoken. Remember! And now leave this room, or I will."

She never knew at what hour that night her husband returned. He slept in his clothes, in the living-room, and he was still sleeping there when she rose the next morning. He was surly and silent all day, and she was stiff and silent. Bit by bit, as the days passed, the unnaturalness wore away. But the experience was never forgotten by either the husband or the wife.

To Alison's unspeakable surprise, Keppner made his appearance again at the end of some days. He was uproariously greeted by Phil, and calmly greeted by Phil's wife. Before long, things had settled back into their old routine, as far as outward appearances went.

But there was never another *tête-à-tête* interview between Keppner and the wife of his friend. And the more Alison thought about his attitude, the more puzzled did she become. Had the man no pride? He acted like a cringing cur, crawling back to lick the foot that had kicked him!

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER invitation that she was loath to accept, did Alison presently receive. It was to take tea in Mrs. Shapleigh's up-town flat. Only the fact that she had thrice refused similar ones induced her to accept this. Moreover, Mrs. Shapleigh pleaded that she, herself, was on the eve of leaving for a Southern resort and might not be able again to see dear Mrs. Howland for quite a while. Assured of this mitigating fact, Alison permitted herself to be persuaded into an acceptance.

She was asked for four o'clock, but she hadn't an idea of the distance nor of the length of time the trip would take. She therefore arrived very late, and after the rest of the guests were assembled.

The apartment-house was a very showy one, and an exceedingly correct maid admitted Alison to the Shapleighs' flat. The moment she entered, her nostrils were assailed with a heavy perfume. It was a combination of gardenias, American beauty roses, and incense.

About twelve women were seated around the small drawing-room and Alison was surprised at the *empressement* with which they all greeted her. She little dreamed what a clever advance agent her hostess had been.

"I was just at the point of giving you up, dear Mrs. Howland," purred that hostess. "Sit down and let me pour you some tea. Wait until I

make you a fresh cup. Here are some sandwiches to nibble on, in the meantime. This will be ready in a moment."

Alison had never seen her so gorgeous, nor so beautiful. Her gray chiffon tea-gown was bordered with ten-inch bands of chinchilla and girdled with a heavy silver rope which ended in huge swinging tassels. A silver fillet bound her brow, and her hands were loaded with rings.

The general conversation was a surprise to Alison. It was exclusively concerned with the doings of smart society: weddings, theatre-parties, Opera, dances — who wore what and who sat where. Mrs. Shapleigh's friends were expensively dressed in the height of fashion, but not for one moment did they give the impression of being "to the manor born." And, granting that a large portion of smart society is not to the manor born, there was still a certain intangible something about these women that marked them as outsiders; Alison was almost sure that they didn't know the people they discussed so eagerly. Their very eagerness was suspicious in itself; so, too, were the frequent disagreements as to whether such-and-such a person really were "Mrs. This" or "Miss That." And they constantly used the words "society leader."

"Have you seen your cousin, Mrs. Bleecker Gansevoort, lately, Mrs. Howland?" asked the hostess, handing Alison her cup of tea.

("Why didn't she say 'Mrs. Bleecker Ten Eyck Gansevoort?" thought the girl wickedly. "What an opportunity to neglect! But, at least, she didn't miss the relationship!")

Aloud she was replying: "Yes, we dined there not long ago."

Every one looked up in interest, and Mrs. Shapleigh continued: "Oh, indeed! And were the Billy Mortimers there?"

Alison, very much amused, gave the desired answer.

"Mrs. Mortimer is so *chic,* isn't she?" broke in one of the guests. "I love the way she does her hair. She looked gorgeous at the Opera, on Monday night; she was in white panne velvet heavily embroidered in silver,— one of the most beautiful frocks I've ever seen. What did she wear at your dinner, Mrs. Howland?"

"Pink satin, I think it was; but it might have been yellow. They look so much alike at night."

"No, it is pink. I've seen her in that frock. The little sleeves were gathered to look like rose petals, weren't they?"

Alison admitted that they were.

"I think," said a woman who had not yet spoken, "I think Kathleen Mortimer is the swellest woman in the young married set. She has so much class, and she's so exclusive. They say you can't make an inch of headway with her unless she wants you to. You know, Chappie Lawrence and Tony Warren were both crazy to marry her."

"Is it true, Mrs. Howland," asked another woman, "that Mrs. Gansevoort serves her cocktails in whisky glasses?"

Alison burst out laughing.

"I'm afraid you'll think me terribly ignorant," she admitted, "but I don't know cocktail glasses

from whisky glasses. These were long-stemmed glasses, with wide shallow bowls."

"Oh, just the regular cocktail glasses," said her questioner. But it took all of Alison's prestige, as cousin of Mrs. Gansevoort and Mrs. Mortimer, to keep her from losing caste by this frank admission. And so the intellectual talk rolled on.

When Alison rose to go, a Mrs. Wolf immediately insisted on driving her home.

"My car is waiting," she announced. "It will give me great pleasure."

"But I live so far down-town. It is very sweet of you, but I hate to take you so much out of your way."

Mrs. Wolf repeated that it would be a pleasure, and that the distance was nothing in a car, so Alison yielded. She would much rather have gone home alone, but she didn't quite see how she could manage it. Mrs. Wolf seemed to be more devoted to Mrs. Shapleigh, and more intimate with her, than any woman there. She called her "dearest Madeleine," and fawned upon her to such an extent that Alison was sure that a warm friendship must exist between them.

Mrs. Shapleigh clasped Alison's hand closely at parting.

"When I come back, you must ask me to tea some day, with Mrs. Gansevoort and Mrs. Mortimer," she smiled. "Good-bye, dear Mrs. Howland. Come and see me as soon as I return."

The Wolf limousine stood waiting, and the moment the two women were seated, Mrs. Wolf began to talk.

"Mrs. Shapleigh is very beautiful, isn't she?" she said.

"Oh, very, indeed," agreed Alison. "It is such a rare type."

"Have you ever seen her husband?"

"Yes. We all lived in the same house for a little while."

"Well, isn't he a fool?"

"A fool? Oh, I don't think so."

"Don't you? I do. How can any man believe the dope that Madeleine Shapleigh gives her husband? Do you know what his income is?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I can tell you exactly. It is twenty-four hundred dollars. He gets two hundred dollars a month."

Alison made no reply, and Mrs. Wolf continued: "That's a princely sum, isn't it?"

"I should think it was sufficient for two persons," said Alison coldly.

"It depends on how they live. Have you any idea of the price of that tea-gown that Madeleine wore to-day?"

"No. I'm not good at such things."

"It certainly didn't cost a cent less than six hundred dollars, and it was probably nearer a thousand. There were yards of the most superb chinchilla on it, and it was from Callot. A third of your yearly income on one tea-gown is rather extravagant, don't you think?"

"She evidently has an income of her own," began Alison and was about to change the subject when her companion cut in.

"She? Not a cent."

"Oh, really, Mrs. Wolf, I think you are mistaken. I have heard that they had a very beautiful home, and her father probably makes her an allowance. Do tell me about all these places that we are passing. You know I am a stranger, and I am so interested in New York. These houses must be the homes of all sorts of interesting people."

"You can't tell me anything about Madeleine's family," replied Mrs. Wolf viciously, entirely ignoring the balance of Alison's speech. She might just as well have said, "You can't get me off of this subject," for such was actually the case. Because of hold-ups in the crowded afternoon traffic, the ride was a slow one. And during the whole of it, Alison was never once able to divert her. "I know all about the Nortons. My husband has done a great deal of business with Mr. Norton, and it is in that way that I know the daughters so well. They always wanted to make a great show, and for years the father had to spend more than he should, and now the end has come. He's down and out. Gone to smash. Failed."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that! It must be awfully hard to begin life over again, when you are well along in years."

"Well, that being the case, how do you suppose Madeleine Shapleigh gets her clothes and her trips? Do you know the ridiculous tarradiddle that she tells her husband? That Félice — the big modiste on Fifth Avenue, you know — dresses her for nothing, just because of her figure and the advertisement she makes for the establishment! As if Félice

needed that kind of advertising! Ed Shapleigh is a poor fool!"

"Probably it is true," said Alison. "I know one of the first places I ever went with Mrs. Shapleigh was to see a parade of mannequins at Félice's. And she gave several orders."

"Of course she did. And immediately afterwards was ordered to Atlantic City for her health. And friends of mine saw her down there with that rich doctor who is so crazy about her. They stayed at the same hotel and went out together in a double wheeled-chair all the time, and —"

"Really, Mrs. Wolf," interrupted Alison, "Mrs. Shapleigh is my friend. I cannot discuss her in this way. Oh, here we are at my door. Tell your man, please, that this is the house. Right over this shop. Thank you so very much for the ride."

"You must come and see me," said Mrs. Wolf very cordially.

"Thank you. You are very good. *Good*-night." And she ran up-stairs.

Phil was out, the fire was bright, and it wasn't worth while to take off her hat, as it would soon be time to go to dinner. So, loosening her wraps, the girl sat down in the firelit darkness and gave herself to thought.

"Save, oh, save me from my friends," was the burden of her mental song. But, much as she disliked Mrs. Wolf, she couldn't help dwelling on what she said, nor remembering, with startling distinctness, that doctor's long visit last December.

Then she began to reflect how lumbering and heavy she, herself, felt in such conversations. She

couldn't join in, and the others wouldn't let her stay out; and her excuses and efforts at turning the subject sounded stiff and awkward. Both her taste and principles were offended, and she was self-conscious and uncomfortable from first to last.

It never had been so at home. But then, of course, the family atmosphere had been different. And in local society there had always been marked deference shown to Terry preferences. You couldn't judge by Coningsboro.

Well, at Cousin Mary's it hadn't been so. She had never once had to think of herself, nor to make a conscious effort. Everything just flowed. But she immediately remembered that Cousin Mary was a relation, and that the same blood, therefore, ran in their veins. Perhaps that made a difference.

Suddenly there flashed into her mind the expression, "a fish out of water," and with the thought, came the picture of a poor, gasping, flapping, convulsive thing, panting for its natural element and growing weaker with each gasp.

That was what she was with Mrs. Shapleigh and her ilk. She was a fish out of water.

Next came that thought which was becoming almost her obsession. Masks! What masks she had been viewing! Mrs. Shapleigh wore one. Mrs. Wolf wore one. Possibly every guest at that party, except she, herself, had worn one.

This she said in all honesty, for it was an odd fact that, at that time, Alison Howland failed to realize that her own mask, that afternoon, had been just as thick as any other, her actual thoughts and feelings just as carefully concealed!

Some time in February, Phil and Al Keppner went off to Boston together, to spend two or three days. An important new piece was to be tried out there, and the celebrated dramatic critic must be on hand. Phil went with him, by his invitation.

Alison was not asked whether she minded being left alone. Her husband advised her to go out to some restaurant and get her heavy meal in the middle of the day, and then to have supper and a cup of tea at home in the evening. She promised to follow this sensible plan, and he went off radiant. It was his first real holiday since his marriage.

Alison couldn't help wondering what would happen if she should be taken ill in the apartment. It boasted no telephone, and she had not a real friend in the whole of the great city. The Mortimers were at Aiken, and the Gansevoorts were in Florida. But, as she reminded herself, she was never ill, and three days was not a very long time.

The first evening of her solitude she had a call from Mr. Ferriss. Ferriss was the man whose intimacy with the influential Mr. Maxon was considered such an asset; he was also the protector of the "sweet little thing" whom Phil Howland had suggested to his wife as a desirable friend and companion.

Ferriss had not been to the Howlands' for a long time and, if she must be interrupted, Alison was glad that he was the one to do it. He was the only man with decent manners who ever entered her house.

This time, he had come with a specific object — to invite the Howlands to a restaurant dinner the

following evening. It was the first invitation he had ever extended to them.

"Oh, I am so sorry," cried Alison, "we should have loved to come, I'm sure. But my husband is in Boston with Mr. Keppner, and won't be returning for several days."

"What a perfect shame! And I have just succeeded in capturing that wary bird, Maxon. He's as elusive as a girl, and I know that Howland is no end anxious to meet him."

"He is, indeed. Couldn't you possibly defer the dinner for a few days, Mr. Ferriss? This Boston trip is not going to last long, and I know Mr. Howland will be terribly disappointed. He has been looking forward to this chance for so long."

"Yes. And it's the last one he'll have for a long time. Maxon is just on the eve of sailing for Bermuda. He'll be gone for the balance of the winter."

"I never knew of anything so provoking. I'd telegraph my husband — I know he'd be only too glad to return for the occasion — but I haven't the slightest idea of his address. He didn't tell me where he would be stopping. I don't think he knew himself."

"Well, it is certainly hard luck! My sister and her husband are coming, and I thought that with them and you two, and Maxon, we should make a very jolly party. Rather a preponderance of the stern sex, but as long as there were two of you, I thought that you and Blanche wouldn't mind. And now she won't have a soul to keep her in countenance. I wish you'd come just the same, and meet

her. I know that you would like each other. Won't you? Please do."

It would never have occurred to the girl to accept, except for the fact that Mr. Maxon would be there. She was not one of those women who are always trying to pull wires in their husband's behalf and who usually succeed in messing things up disgustingly. Alison Howland was no would-be wire-puller. Even if she went to this dinner, she would not try to capture for Phil an offer from the great Mr. Maxon; nor would she seek so to captivate that gentleman that he would want to see her again. She merely thought, in a vague way, that since her husband was doomed to miss the great opportunity he had so long been seeking, it might be better for her to show up and to make the name of Howland mean something to Mr. Maxon — simply make it stand out from the crowd. He might notice that — well — that she wasn't a nobody, and that might predispose him, later, in Phil's favor. By great good luck, something might even be said about Phil's hopes, and she could say how glad her husband would be if there were any chance of an opening. And the presence of Ferriss' sister would make everything correct.

"Won't you come, Mrs. Howland?" repeated Mr. Ferriss. "Blanche — that is Mrs. Bonner —, will be so glad to know you. And you will save my party from disaster."

"You are quite sure that your sister is coming?"

"Naturally. Should I be asking you to meet her, otherwise?"

"And Mr. Maxon is an equal certainty?"

"Yes, I've caught him at last, I think."

"Don't think me rude, Mr. Ferriss," begged the girl. "I should love to come, but unless I were sure of your sister's presence, I should be forced to decline, of course. As it is, I shall be delighted to accept. At what time am I expected?"

"At eight o'clock, if that suits you."

"Perfectly. And where is your party to be?"

"At Victor's." (He watched her narrowly as he said this, but the name meant nothing to her as he immediately discovered.) "I'm too sorry, Mrs. Howland, that you'll have to come up alone. I shall send a carriage for you, and I should certainly come for you myself, except for my other guests."

"Why, I shouldn't dream of such a thing! As for the carriage, thank you very much, but I shall, of course, order one for myself. And I shall be delighted to meet you at Victor's at eight o'clock. Oh, and just where is Victor's, though I suppose my driver will know."

"Yes, certainly, he will know," but he gave the address.

"And now," laughed Alison, "I am going to prove to you my ignorance. I don't know much about parties in smart restaurants. Shall I wear a hat and a high light frock, or an evening gown?"

"An evening gown, unless you prefer the other."

"Dear me, no. I only want to be correct, and not to disgrace you. I am sure it will be a perfect party."

Ferriss lingered only a little while. She appreciated his tact, and he talked very charmingly during the few moments that he remained.

Alison quite looked forward to the party and, though she wished repeatedly that Phil could have been on hand, she thought it was quite fortunate that they had not both been out of town.

She reached Victor's almost on the stroke of eight and found a very handsome, and very voluble, host awaiting her. She was immediately struck by his volubility. He talked very fast.

"Am I the first?" she demanded, looking around.

"Yes. Shall we go up-stairs?"

"Oh, we are not dining down here?"

"No. It is nicer on the floor above."

"But don't you want to await the rest of your guests here?"

"No. I think we will go up."

She ascended with him, and they were shown to a private room. The moment the door was opened, she saw a table set for two. She stood stock-still outside the door.

"This is not our table," she said.

"Yes, it is. I've had all sorts of bad luck with my guests, Mrs. Howland. Come and sit down, and let me tell you about it."

"Not here," she said. "In fact, Mr. Ferriss, since your party has fallen through, I think it would be better for me to go home, if you will call me a carriage."

"Mrs. Howland! You certainly will not do such a thing as that! With my dinner all ordered, and just because my well-laid plans have gone astray!"

She honestly didn't know what to do. She couldn't decide whether or not he was telling the

truth. Perhaps, after all, he was. And as she was a married woman, there could be nothing abnormal in her dining with him. But not in that room! That went without saying!

"If it won't upset your arrangements to dine down-stairs," she said slowly, "I will stay, if you really wish it. I should think, though, that you would much rather give your party some other time."

"You would think nothing of the sort," he replied in a very low voice; "must it be down-stairs?"

Again she was tempted to run away. But, not really knowing what was best to do, she replied to his question. "Most certainly. Down-stairs, or nowhere."

As they went down she said: "Where is your sister?"

"Ill," he replied.

"And Mr. Maxon?"

"Date with a lady. Now here we are! Where will you sit?"

They selected a table, and Ferriss helped her to take off her cloak. She felt his hand touch the back of her neck, and she drew quickly away. It might, however, have been accidental.

"God, you look beautiful," he whispered as they took their seats.

She started to rise.

"Sit still," he commanded in a low tone. And without raising his voice one iota, he began precipitately to make the maddest love she had ever heard. Before he had gone far, she was on her feet and picking up her cloak. Her host seized her

arm and ordered her to sit down, but she shook off his hand and, with trembling fingers, fastened the clasp at her neck.

Beckoning a waiter, she told him to order her a cab.

"I'm coming with you," said Ferriss brutally.

"You are not," she replied, and without a glance, or a farewell word, she went from the room and into the waiting cab, giving the driver the address even as she opened the door.

Safe at home, she had no companion but her thoughts, and they were poor company.

"Are all men beasts?" she kept asking herself. "Do they all jump into this sort of thing with no warning, no preamble of any kind? Do they think they can take a woman by main force? They are savages, cave-men, animals! Vile, filthy animals!"

And then another thought struck her. Ferriss' mask! How snugly it had fitted, how impenetrable it had proven, until that moment when he had chosen to raise it!

Phil came home the next morning, in high good humor. He and Keppner had had a glorious time. They had met Ferriss on their way to the station, the day they had left, and had tried to persuade him to go with them to Boston, but he had declined.

They had met him in the morning, and he had come to her in the evening of the same day, with his trumped-up tale of hoping to find her husband!

She told Phil the whole disgusting story.

"Good Lord! Ferriss! Well, I'll be damned!" was his sole comment; but he looked at her queerly.

A little later he asked: "Had you any idea that Ferriss was sweet on you?"

"Would I have gone with him, if I had?" she demanded hotly. "Certainly, I hadn't."

After still another pause, Phil said: "I suppose this cooks my goose with that Maxon job."

"You never had any goose to cook," replied Alison sharply. "Can't you see that Mr. Ferriss' repeated excuses were all lies. He had no intention of doing anything for you."

"No, that's true. Very likely not."

"I don't even feel certain that he knows Mr. Maxon very well."

"Well, if I could be sure of that, there'd be nothing to worry over."

Nothing to worry over! Nothing to worry over, in the fact that his wife had been trapped into a *tête-à-tête* and insulted when captured! Evidently such things didn't shock Phil. Probably he was accustomed to them. Alison even imagined that she had gained a little luster in his eyes.

"What sort of a place is Victor's?" she presently asked.

"Rotten," he replied, and thus dismissed the subject.

The sole result of the adventure was that Ferriss never again entered the Howlands' door. For that, Alison gave him a grudging credit. He was as horrible as Keppner, he had insulted her as grossly, but he had, at least, his pride. He did not lay himself open to a second rebuff.

CHAPTER VI

As spring approached, Alison began to long for the country. The springtime had always been her favorite season. She had loved to wander outside of Coningsboro and into the country, to follow murmuring brooks, to delve into woods and copses, to smell the fresh damp mould, and to search for the first green sprouts and blossoms. Every spring of her life had she done this, and now she was cooped up in a brick-walled, brick-paved prison, where the only response to the call of the season was languor and listlessness.

As she looked forward to the long summer months, she felt that she could not possibly bear to spend them so. She would coax Phil to Coningsboro for a visit.

Never again would she want to live, permanently live, in as small and quiet a place as the town which had sheltered her girlhood. But she thought how wonderful it would be if Coningsboro could be picked up bodily, and carried to the outskirts of New York. Perhaps there was a Coningsboro out there already, waiting to be discovered.

One day at luncheon, she turned to her husband.

"Phil," she said, "I think it would be lovely to have a little home in the country."

"The *country?* No, thank you. No country for me. I'd go crazy." (Phil Howland would rather have lived in a gutter than in the country.)

"Oh, I don't mean far away, like Coningsboro. I mean just outside of New York, where we could run in every day, if we wanted to."

"And how about the evenings? That's where the rub would come."

"We'd soon have a circle of friends. And we'd have our own home and our interests. The trouble with this life is that it's too detached; there are no responsibilities and very few duties. We have no servant, so we eat out; that cuts housekeeping to a minimum. As to church, I go and I come home again, and that ends it; there is no connection with the church life, and I have no work to do. I have nowhere that I could even ask a class of poor children to come. I rarely speak to a woman, and I have nothing in common with those I do know — except my own cousins, and they lead such a different life that I see them only occasionally. I read, of course; that is the great salvation. But I should read anywhere. There is no exercise except walking on the streets; I can never run out, bare-headed, into the open. I miss my tennis. I miss my occupations. Oh, Phil dear, if you would only believe it and try it, you'd find that a real home would be worth all the theatres and restaurants in the world."

"I tell you, Al, I'd die in the country. I'd get no inspiration for my work."

"That is the greatest point of all. I am sure that you would. I'm convinced that that's precisely what you need. You get no inspiration here. This whole winter you have done nothing but unsigned hack-work."

She saw his face darkening ominously — this was a sore subject — and she hurried on.

"I'm not blaming you. I am sure that you can't help it. And I am equally sure that I've discovered the reason. You need different surroundings, a more inspiring life."

"I need nothing of the sort, Al," replied her husband pettishly. "For heaven's sake, allow me the credit for knowing my own needs. I need mental companionship, and rubbing up against brains other than my own."

"You'd get that in a country home. We'd have neighbors, and you could invite your town friends out."

"How about the winters and the snowstorms? Lord, how I despise a snowstorm in the country!"

Her mind flew back again to that snowy walk outside Coningsboro, and the sunset lights, and Phil's apostrophe to the "Kingdom of Purity." Just words, she supposed, in the light of her later knowledge.

Her husband continued: "Imagine me plowing through snowdrifts every night to get back to my ideal country home!"

"But Phil, that's just the point. If you had a business that took you in town every day, if you had to leave early and return late, I'd never say a word about it. But you haven't. You need never go into the city, except when it suited you."

"Great Scott, Al, you'd have me raving crazy on your hands, inside of six months. Cooped up in the country from the time the first snow fell until spring melted the last drift? Not on your life!"

"Don't be absurd, Phil. I merely meant that you needn't go out on snowy days unless you wanted to."

"I could see that horrible expanse of white glare from my own windows."

"Then you could pull down the shades and sit in the dark." She couldn't help laughing at his absurdities. "And if you couldn't stand it, you could call a hack and drive to the station and go to the lovely, black, muddy city."

"You touch the exact point when you say hack. Suburban hacks cost money."

"They don't begin to cost as much as constant drinks in restaurants. Our income is as big as Elsa's and Roscoe's, I'm sure, and they have a darling little home of their own."

"Yes. But Coningsboro isn't New York. You put Elsa's house in a New York suburb, and we couldn't afford to touch it."

"Oh, Phil, I'm sure we could."

"And I know we couldn't. Just go out into the suburbs, and look at a few houses, and ask their rents, if you want to be convinced."

"I should be willing to bet a good deal that we could get a little country house for the rent that we pay for this apartment."

"Then it's lucky you haven't the chance to place your bet, for you'd lose your money. We couldn't possibly do it. And look at the size of these rooms, and the convenience of the situation! Beside which, we have, as you seem to forget, our heat and light included. And we need practically no service. In the country, there'd be servants, and

they'd always be leaving. There'd be coal to buy, and there'd be a furnace to burn it in. Who'd take care of that furnace? Not I, I warrant you. Not any maid that you'd find! And there'd be lights, and water-rent, and hack-fare, and train-fare, and club-dues if you got your tennis, and parties to give if you made friends, and grass to cut in summer, and snow to shovel in the winter. *No, I thank you!*"

"Well, of course, if you don't want to go, you'll never do it. I know that very well. But you exaggerate everything horribly. There are living expenses everywhere. And in a country life, while there would be some extra ones, there would also be plenty of offsets which you never even mention. Also, if you worked more, as I am sure you would in a different atmosphere, you would sell more, and we should have a bigger income."

"My dear girl, you quite miss the point. You take the position that work is my end and aim in life. It is not. It is merely a means to the end. Work, *per se,* does not attract me. I love life, and I must work to live. Here you are, proposing to take me to a life that I loathe, in order that I may work like the devil, and thus earn sufficient money to continue to live the life that I loathe, provided that I also continue to work like the devil!"

For the life of her, Alison could not help laughing. He *was* witty, there was no doubt about it.

The laughter quite restored Phil's good humor.

"I'll tell you what it is," he said, "if we had money enough to run a decent little place, and keep one motor, and come in town to spend a night or

two at a good hotel every now and then, I'd be your man for the country. Find me that much money, and I'll move with you to-morrow."

The conversation, though it killed some budding hopes of Alison's, succeeded in putting a new thought into her mind. She would go out and look at small suburban houses and see if Phil were right, and whether he knew what he was talking about. She hated to spend the money for even such inexpensive trips, but perhaps the end would justify the means.

For four successive days, she sneaked off immediately after luncheon and did not return until dinner time. She went by train, she went by boat, she went by trolley. And in the end, she was convinced that Phil was right.

Beautiful houses there were, but, naturally, she didn't even look at them.

Modest houses there were, and their prices were stupendous.

Little houses there were, and they were both unattractive and inconvenient.

In the newest settlements nearly all the trees had been sacrificed and, in consequence, the chief beauty was gone. Alison gazed on incredibly small parallelograms, bare as the palm of her hand, marked out by stakes, and fabulously priced. No offers of "easy terms of payment" could tempt any sensible person to overlook their glaring disadvantages.

Leaving plots (at which she had looked only because of the agent's forceful personality), she turned her eyes on houses. Small they were, inconvenient, claptrap, badly built, standing unshaded

in the sun, and with piazzas and rooms the size of a thimble. One agent had a house that possessed a singular advantage that he had never seen duplicated. The kitchen held two stationary tubs, there being no separate laundry. Either of these tubs could equally well be used as a dish-pan, because of its situation in the kitchen. A butler's pantry then became as superfluous as a laundry. And between the tubs, there was a removable partition. When it was taken out, the two tubs were thrown into one and became a servant's bathtub. A wonderful scheme!

In the new sections, sidewalks existed in the imagination only, although sign-boards bore the names of "streets" which, in their present form, were nothing but tracts of coarse grass. In the older settlements and the villages, sidewalks and streets there were indeed, but they were unlovely. Cheap houses and cheaper shops jostled each other for position. Curbs were bordered with refuse-barrels and lunch-wagons. Vendors of peanuts and hokeypokey called their wares and trundled their wagons; trolley cars creaked past; whistles blew from factories, and the answering crowds were nearly all dirty, starved-looking, wild-faced foreigners. Garish saloons invited, and staggering examples of their hospitality zigzagged from gutters to walls and back again. Country peace, indeed!

Alison made humorous confession to her husband of her explorations. And that ended the talk of a home in the country.

One night in late April, Alison woke suddenly to

the consciousness of odd sounds. She looked around and saw that she was alone in the room. Raising herself on her elbow, she listened intently. There was certainly some one in the living-room; she could hear a stealthy tread.

Perhaps it was Phil; if so, he would soon come in and join her. She waited and waited, but he did not come, and the sounds did not cease. And presently, the first pale rays of dawn began to mitigate the darkness.

The girl could stand it no longer. Rising, she slipped into dressing-gown and *mules,* and made her way toward the living-room. All the way down the hall she could hear that steady muffled tread. She was not exactly afraid, but she was trembling violently. The thought crossed her mind that she must some day buy a revolver and learn to use it.

Stopping at the living-room door, she looked in. The tramping man was her husband, but she hardly recognized him. White to greenness, haggard, wild-eyed, dishevelled, he paced back and forth, biting his finger-ends and staring into space.

"Phil!" she whispered, for her voice failed her, "Phil, what is the matter?"

He stood and faced her. For a long spell, he didn't seem even to recognize her. Finally he spoke through lips that moved stiffly.

"How much money have you?" he asked.

At first she thought that she could not have heard aright, but he repeated the question in the same dull monotone: "How much money have you?"

"In the house, do you mean?" she finally asked.

"No. Anywhere. In the whole world. How much cash can you lay your hands on, by to-night?"

"How much do you need?"

"Sixteen hundred dollars."

"I haven't anything like it."

A spasm passed over his face and he resumed his restless march.

"What do you want with it, Phil?"

"I have to have it. It's the money, or prison, or the river."

"Are you in debt?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Roulette."

At the word, a lightning-flash illumined the past to Alison. How had she ever been so blind?

Those restless early evenings and mysterious late nights!

Roulette.

Those lazy days and hopes of sudden windfalls!

Roulette.

Those good days when they ate expensively and bad days when they ate cheaply!

Roulette.

Those uncertain fits of temper, sometimes uproariously jovial, oftener morosely silent and abstracted!

Roulette.

With it all, there was one tiny touch of relief. Her husband had not been spending his evenings with other women. And in this she was right. Although no Joseph, Phil Howland would always find

women to be the least of his temptations. He was no squire of dames.

The tale came out bit by bit. He had borrowed till he had no further credit. He had given his note which must be met to-morrow. Last night, hoping to make a big haul and recoup himself, he had gambled all night and had lost heavily. He must have sixteen hundred dollars in about twelve hours.

"Wait a moment," said Alison, and hurried toward the bedroom.

They had been eating at home of late, and eating lightly, because the spring had affected both their appetities. She had, consequently, been stuffing a number of bills into her secret box. Every little helps, and it behooved them to take stock of their entire hoard of worldly wealth.

Her drawer was neat, as always. She put her hand under the pile of smooth-lying lingerie and drew forth her box. Immediately she was struck with its lightness. She shook it, and it made no sound. With trembling fingers, she undid the ribbons. The box was empty!

A thief! So Phil was both a gambler and a thief. The words sang in her ears: "Gambler, thief. Gambler, thief. Gambler, thief!"

Well, there wasn't anything else now. Everything that could happen to her had happened. Every blow had fallen. Every hope had failed. There was nothing left to come. She, Alison Terry, had drained life's cup to the dregs. She could never suffer any more, because her capacity for suffering was exhausted. Just as a man struck

down by the hand of an assassin might, in his last conscious moment, say to himself: "Well, I'm gone. But I can never be murdered again," so did Alison Howland feel sure that she had struck bottom in the pit of despair.

Returning to the living-room with the box in her hand, she stood before her husband.

"You took this?"

"Yes."

"And it is gone?"

"Yes. Everything is gone. There is no use in talking. Just tell me how much money you can lay your hands on."

"I have six hundred dollars of my wedding money lying in the bank."

"What else?"

"My quarterly allowance was paid ten days ago; three hundred and seventy-five dollars. Twenty-five of it is spent already. The rent will be due next week. And we haven't another penny to live on, from now to July, except what your father sends."

"We'll have to get along somehow."

"You cannot have all of it. We simply must pay the rent and keep a little something for food. I'll give you two hundred of that, which will be eight hundred altogether."

"And what about the other eight?"

"I don't know."

"You'll have to wire your family for it."

"I will never do that. Nothing would make me consider it."

"Gertrude — you and she are such pals —"

"You'd take Ken's money under existing conditions?"

"By G-d," he burst out, "I'd take *any one's*. Wake up, Al, I samply *have* to have this money, at once. Even if I steal to get it, I must have it."

She shivered at that word.

"Can't you borrow from some of your friends?"

"I've been doing that all winter. Ferriss shut down on me weeks ago. Even Al Keppner won't go any further."

"Then you'll have to sell something. What about your watch?"

"Gone already."

The upshot of it was that they decided to sell some of their wedding gifts. But these would not make up the sum. Then Alison had a flash of inspiration.

"My pendant," she said. "That one that Aunt Juliette sent me. It is set with diamonds and a very good-sized sapphire. It has never been worn. It is in Cartier's case, and Gertrude tells me that Cartier is one of the biggest jewellers in Paris. You could take that down to Tiffany's."

"The very thing!" The blood was coming back to his face now. He glimpsed salvation. "Go and get it, Al, and let's take a look at it."

When she returned to the room, she carried a small box and a book.

"Philippse Howland," she said, in a queer breathless voice, "I want you to listen to me. Every cent that you can hope for is mine. So is the quarterly allowance. You cannot possibly draw on it, without my cheque. The wedding gifts are mine. This

pendant is mine. You are not at liberty to sell it without my consent.

"Now, hear what I say. *Not one penny, not one article, do you get, till you give me your word of honor that you will never gamble again, as long as yow live.* You are to swear it on this book."

That was her ultimatum. Threats, curses, evasions, pleas, fell on deaf ears. And in the end, the man being both weak and desperate, of course she won.

It was a strange scene. The spring dawn creeping in at the windows, the haggard man clutching at his reprieve, the tall pale girl with unbound hair and slippered feet, and the oath on the little morocco-bound Bible which had been Alison's confirmation gift. To her dying day, Alison Howland never forgot that April morning.

Of course, a summer in Coningsboro was out of the question now. Phil wouldn't go, she couldn't leave him, and, strangest phase of all, she didn't want to see those dear home people face-to-face yet awhile. She knew that she couldn't act her part.

She had her hands full enough in the ensuing weeks. She and Phil had to live on next to nothing. Milk and biscuits made meal after meal. And Phil had to be watched, and coaxed and scolded and threatened. The evenings were awful. She used to go to bed exhausted every night of her life.

By June, it had told on her so that she could hardly drag around. She used to stand at the foot of the flight of stairs and wonder how she could

ever toil up to the top. She went out only when she was forced to. And at last things got so bad that she realized that, in spite of the expense, she would have to see a doctor. When she returned from the trip, she looked rather frightened. And that night she had something to tell her husband. She wondered what he would say.

What he did say, was this:

"Damnation! Well, of course, there's only one thing to be done. And even that is devilishly expensive!"

When Philippse Howland had plunged his wife into what she believed to be the nethermost depths, by showing himself up as a thief and a gambler, there was still one rôle which he had not filled — murderer. That rôle, apparently, he had reserved for his wife.

She was so stupid about it, so uncomprehending of innuendo, that he had eventually to put the thing much more baldly than he wanted to; and of course, it sounded far worse than he intended it should.

No scene, even in their rather tumultuous life, had approached the one that ensued. Alison heard that she was a fool, that "every one did it," that they "couldn't afford a family." She simply sat with her face so white and frightened, so horror-stricken, that the man before her was forced, eventually, to pause in his flow of logic and argument.

Then she spoke. "Never mention this thing again, if you want me to live with you," and the subject was closed. He knew that he might as well reason with a stone as with that white-faced woman.

So he left her, and went out, and drank enough to take the edge off things.

Alison, alone, had one of her enlightening mental back-flashes. She remembered Phil's repeated insistence on the fact that "no flat in the world would hold more than two." So that was what he had meant! She had been dense indeed!

Her dread of the torrid summer months in the city were removed by what seemed to be a miracle, and the hand that performed the miracle was Keppner's. Alison wondered sharply why this man was destined to play so important a part in her life. He it was who had first suggested to her mind that idea of human masks which she could never forget, and back to which she found herself harking so continually. And now it was Keppner again who was to save her from a summer which she had contemplated with such distaste.

Keppner had a friend who was about to take a summer course at Columbia. As he lived out in Indiana, he would bring his wife with him to New York; and they wanted an apartment suitable for housekeeping, and with large airy rooms. It must be furnished and equipped for home meals. The Howlands' apartment precisely filled the bill for Mr. and Mrs. Fleitmann, and the Fleitmanns' money was more than welcome to Mr. and Mrs. Howland, who immediately took rooms at a cheap suburban hotel.

This hotel was found by answering advertisements. There were two great requisites from the Howlands' point of view: proximity to New York and cheapness. The latter was the greater. But

eventually a place was found that, to the outer eye at least, seemed to meet their requirements. It was used as a boarding-school for boys in the winter, and both buildings and grounds were large and attractive. But when it came to a question of food and patrons, it was a very different matter, as Alison discovered in a surprisingly short time after taking up her abode there.

We all agree that money is not everything, but, if we are honest, we are also forced to admit that it is certainly a great help. Particularly is it useful as a means to meeting pleasant people in a strange place.

In a locality where you are known, where, perhaps, even your ancestors have been known, the length of your purse makes slight difference. If necessary, you could almost scrub floors in a gingham apron, without loss of caste.

But in a new place, unless you can live well, you won't meet the people who do live well. It is not that they care more about money than do the " folks back home "; it is that they will never even know of your existence. Without the money to support an establishment like theirs, to haunt their haunts and tread their paths, you are, generally speaking, powerless to meet them. You can isolate yourself, or you can consort with the regular patrons of inferior resorts, but that is your sole choice.

On the other hand, to those who have the money without the more desirable innate qualifications, the path is often just as lonely and as thorny. Which only goes to show that no one class of persons has the monopoly on loneliness.

The name of the Howlands' new home was Harrington Hall. When they arrived upon the scene, the house was already well filled. Most of the guests had been there during the previous season, and thus knew each other quite well.

A crowd of rakish-looking husbands departed by the morning train and returned in the late afternoon. A crowd of lazy wives idled away their days and made resplendent appearances in the evenings. And a crowd of ill-trained, disobedient children overran the place and rendered life hideous.

Alison spent her days out of doors or in her own room, but always alone. She was courteous to every one, but she consorted with no one. Away from the crowd, she employed her time in reading, writing, and sewing little white garments. The finished pile of these grew steadily.

In the evenings, when she felt equal to it, she was apt to run into town with Phil and visit some roof-garden. Another vista of the hectic summer life of a great city was thus opened to her.

But although she made no intimates among her fellow-boarders, they gave her much good food for observation and thought. From her window she could watch them on the lawns and hear them on the piazzas. Many a choice scrap went to swell the entries in her blank books.

The mothers of the hotel families belonged to a race hitherto unknown to Alison. They did light laundry-work in their bedrooms and fancy-work on the piazzas, and they gossipped; and that was their life. They never read. They never bothered with their children, except to side with them in their quar-

rels. These juvenile squabbles often resulted in adult tempests. Alison, overhearing the vulgar taunts and gibes, and watching the violent friendships and equally violent hatreds, contrasted these women with her own lovely mother. Then suddenly, as she sat smiling in tender remembrance, there flashed into her brain a new thought. Her mother wore a mask! A smooth, calm, perfectly-fitting mask! A mask of tolerance! But still a mask!

The more she thought of it, the more she realized it. She had been very quick to repudiate the idea when Keppner first suggested it to her. Well, she had been wrong. It was true.

Mustn't her mother often be irritated by vulgarity and pettiness? Not being a fool, she must. Yet imagine her going about, showing on her face every passing disgust!

Then masks were not necessarily hypocritical! They might simply be the accoutrements of politeness and decency. That was a new thought.

During the summer, Alison wrote so much that she was obliged to ask Phil to buy her a new blank book. And she sewed so much that her trunk carried piles of tiny white garments when she returned to town in October.

It was good, after all, to get back to her own home. It never looked more attractive than in contrast to that crude summer boarding-house.

Alison moved all her sewing things into the little room where she had already established her writing-table. And in that room she came to spend more and more of her time.

Her outings were taken in the Fifth Avenue busses and on the park benches. She ate at home generally, sometimes alone, sometimes with Phil. Occasionally she even went out to dinner with him.

She discovered a wonderful opportunity to hear good music at some free concerts in one of the department-stores and at some church organ-recitals. She used to sit with her eyes closed, and dream, and plan for the future.

In December came the news of the birth of Gertrude's little son. He was to be christened Archibald Terry Rawle, and called by his middle name. Mrs. Terry's letters were nothing short of rhapsodies, and Alison could see that the little newcomer was the king of the household. Gertrude wrote a few lines to say that she was "beatifically happy," and that she could hardly wait to show her darling to his Aunt Alison, and Kenneth wrote several ecstatic pages. It was all very lovely.

Mrs. Terry was planning to come down in March to be with her second daughter. Alison dreaded this greatly. She had never told her mother that she kept no servant, and now the truth would have to come out. Phil was sure to be at his worst with a visitor, and Mrs. Terry would be none too comfortably lodged in the little sewing-room which would have to be converted into a bedroom during her stay. Alison wrote that she feared for her mother's comfort, that she, herself, was perfectly well, and that she was going to a hospital in March. But Mrs. Terry replied that she could not be happy away from her daughter.

However, man proposes, and God disposes. Late

in February, Mr. Terry slipped on the ice and broke his right arm, and thus put an end to all thought of his wife's leaving him. She would have been surprised if she could have known of her daughter's relief.

Alison Howland's little son was born in March. And as she cuddled the tiny form in her arms and held it to her breast, she knew that life was good. This, her son, should be her crown of content and her blessing. Over and over again, she whispered prayers of gratitude that so great a gift had come to her. As she lay looking down at that tiny fuzzy head with the funny little palpitating soft spot in its crown, as she felt those baby hands clasping her fingers and saw the vague baby eyes blinking up into hers, she realized, at last, what happiness meant.

CHAPTER VII

MOTHER and baby returned home in April, and a reconstructed ménage became a necessity. A servant must be found, because Alison's time was entirely taken up with her baby. She could not undertake the cooking and the housework.

Three or four miserable slatterns followed each other in quick succession. Alison tried the kind that stayed in the house and the kind that went home every night. All her experiments were equally unsuccessful, and she was nearly at her wits' end.

The difficulty of getting the baby-carriage up and down stairs was another unforeseen inconvenience. Alison wheeled her son out for a couple of hours every day.

Phil was fond of his child in a queer, awkward, half shamefaced way. But it would have been too much to expect him to be fond of broken nights, and fretful hours, and little garments drying on clothes-horses. He took to sleeping on a couch in the living-room; but even with closed doors, the sound of a crying-spell would penetrate to him, and the wakeful early mornings were particularly trying.

"When he gets a little older," said the baby's father, "it won't be so bad. When do they stop crying at nights, and begin to talk and walk?"

"Talk and walk? You foolish boy," answered the baby's mother. "Not for ages yet. But I don't

think the crying keeps up very long. Anyhow, he scarcely cries at all compared with most babies. He's a perfect darling. Phil, I want to talk to you about his name."

"Yes, I suppose he must have one."

"I want to name him for your father."

"What? Enoch? Why, Al, that would be simply a crime."

"Well, perhaps we could use his middle name, as Gertrude does with her baby. And it would make your father so happy."

"Yes, I suppose it would. But his happiness wouldn't last more than a few years, and the baby would be saddled with that name for life."

"What would you like to name him?"

"I hadn't thought anything about it. What's the matter with my name? It always seemed pretty good to me. Isn't it usual to name the first son for his father?"

"Why, if you want it, I think it would be lovely. It's a beautiful name. Enoch does seem pretty bad, for a child. Our son shall be Philippse Howland, Junior."

The servant problem proving almost insurmountable, and a summer in a torrid city being a poor outlook for little Philippse, it was eventually decided that Alison and the baby should spend the warm months in Coningsboro. Great was the joy at St. Mary's Rectory when this decision was announced. It reached even to the kitchen, and the faces of Ellen and Delia beamed with smiles as they spread the happy news that "Miss Alison was coming home with her baby to stay all summer."

Phil wouldn't go. He promised to come up for them in September or October, and he promised many other things as well. He and Alison had a long and serious talk before her departure. It was the nicest talk they had had for many a day. And, at its conclusion, Phil rose and crossing to his wife's side, kissed her forehead.

"Al, you're a trump," he said. That was all, but for him it was much.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE summer morning, Alison sat bathing her baby. It was a daily function that was attended by the entire household of St. Mary's Rectory, save and except Mr. Terry, and even he often looked in. Mrs. Terry was always present, and Ella and Delia wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world. They were even jealous of the young nurse-maid who had been engaged for the summer, but who really didn't "belong," according to their ideas. They merely tolerated her.

"Mother, Baby is crazy to come to you," laughed Alison. "Just look at him. I shall be jealous soon."

"Granny's own precious boy," cooed Mrs. Terry; "did you ever see anything like the way he has grown, Alison?"

"Look at his little legs; ain't they strong?" chimed in Ellen. "Here's the towel, Miss Alison. It's a shame to take him out, he loves it so."

Mrs. Terry followed her daughter into the shaded bedroom where the young lord of the household had his morning meal and his nap. The baby, his mother, and his grandmother, all loved this quiet hour.

Alison sat looking down at the child at her breast, her face the picture of content. And Mrs. Terry sat looking at her child, and her child's child, and feeling that all was well, indeed.

"You are happy, aren't you, dear?" she presently asked.

"Oh, so happy, Mother; it's a wonderful sort of happiness, isn't it? So special and different. But I'm afraid I've never really appreciated you before. You never understand about a mother's feelings and hopes and fears until you have a child of your own, do you?"

"Dearest," breathed Mrs. Terry, "to me the great proof of your happiness is the way that you have softened. I'll tell you now, my child, that sometimes I feared for you. Not that I doubted Phil's love for you, or yours for him. But we knew so little of him. And he had led such a strange life, away from all home-ties, and in those Bohemian surroundings. And you, yourself, were rather intolerant of those things which called forth your disapproval. I feared there might be trouble. But I can see now how wrong I was to worry. Marriage has done much for you. You are gentler, less positive in your judgments. Your married life has evidently been a great softener. And I am sure you are much happier than in the old days even, aren't you, dear?"

For the fraction of a second, Alison did not reply. Then, touching with a light finger the roseleaf cheek of her son, "Yes, Mother," she said gravely.

And at the words, with an absolutely physical sensation, she felt the clamp of a mask on her face. It was so acute that she almost put up her hand to touch it.

So it had come to this! She, Alison Terry, had assumed as thick and impenetrable a mask as she

could muster, and was wearing it in the presence of her own mother. All her life, she supposed, she would continue to wear it.

Her mind raced back over the knowledge and experience that she had collected in the past eighteen months. What would her mother say if she could peep into her own daughter's heart? *What would she think?* Alison knew that she possessed more worldly knowledge than her mother would ever possess, that she had already passed through more startling and sordid experiences than Mrs. Terry could even imagine, and that the recounting of them would always be an impossibility. Both listener and speaker would feel ashamed and polluted.

There was no help for it. She had not courted the experiences. Gladly would she have shunned them, had she been free to choose. They were forced on her. She had to learn. She had to see. She had to know. Past experiences could not be wiped out by present confession; and present confession would be impotent to mitigate suffering. Rather, it would inflict. It was barred as an impossibility.

And the alternative was a mask!

With a long sighing breath, she accepted her new possession together with its responsibilities.

"Softened!" "Tolerant!" She, softened and grown tolerant! Ferriss wouldn't think so. Nor Keppner! Nor even Phil himself, she feared.

Sitting there in the quiet, in the clean sweet air of her girlhood home, away from the rushing roar of New York's seething maelstrom, she was able to think clearly, to measure, and to weigh.

Mrs. Terry rose, in answer to a light tap at the door and, with a nod of farewell, tiptoed from the room. And Alison was left to her reflections.

Have you ever, dear reader of mine, have you ever lain convalescing from an illness, weak and spent, but with the knowledge that recovery was on the way? Have you gazed around your darkened chamber, where no bright light penetrated, and every footfall was muffled; have you listened to the far-away roar and din of the street, and to the sounds of natural life in the distant parts of the house, and realized that *some day* you must be back in the thick of it; *some day* — your temporary seclusion ended, its measures and values forgotten — you will be out again in the noise and the glare, struggling and pushing with the rest? Where, then, will be the sick-room standards and proportions? Where will be the resolutions against rush, and contamination, and strain? They may be right, they may be clearer-visioned and cleaner-purposed than the standards of the whirligig. But they'll have to go, or, at least, be modified. *They won't measure up against the demands of the ordinary work-a-day world!* And that's the rub!

So Alison, sitting in the hushed room, in the peaceful house, in the quiet village, looked back upon New York. Some day she would return and, when she did, she must inevitably make her methods conform to the exigencies of the life that she found. It was all right to make unbreakable rules in Coningsboro — provided you were going to stay in Coningsboro. But, other places, other manners. And since you could not demand that some four

million souls should immediately regulate their lives to your standards, it followed that you, the newcomer in their midst, must inevitably be the one to accommodate yourself to necessity.

For the first time, Alison looked at her husband's past through her husband's eyes. And this is what she saw:

A child born with certain brilliant gifts inherited from his father, and certain weak characteristics inherited from his mother.

A stern and autocratic father, developing into a fierce tyrant.

A little coward who could no more help lying when frightened than he could help falling when tripped. As a half-blind child should be led gently by the hand until Time heals his infirmity, and fullness of vision renders him capable of taking care of himself, so should this moral weakling have been trained by love instead of fear.

Alison, looking back, could imagine it all. The weak boy seeking shelter behind his mother, that mother striving to shield him, and the tyrant they feared denouncing them both. Inevitable was the break and the subsequent separation.

She could see, too, that Phil and his father both thought they spoke truly when each accused the other of breaking Mrs. Howland's heart. Phil actually believed that his father had done it. Judge Howland was equally convinced that his son had done it. The chances were that it was a joint affair, and that neither father nor son could point an accusing finger at the other.

Phil, adrift, forced to support himself, ill-

equipped by character and training for the task, had reached a mediocre level. He had done as those around him had done. Their standards came to be his standards. They seemed all right to him, and any one who was shocked by them was a prig.

Then, as a climax, he had married one of these prigs, and had taken her to the only surroundings to which he could possibly have taken her. They were all that he had. And she, once arrived, had disliked his friends, disliked his habits, disliked his thoughts, disliked his life. She had expected him to tread the path that she, with her Coningsboro ideas, had chosen as ideal. She had had too little sympathy for his shortcomings. She had married a barnyard fowl and had demanded that he soar with her into the far-away ether of spiritual fancy. And he, together with the rest of the barnyard fowls, had looked upon her with uncomprehending eyes. To them, she was attractive but exotic — distinctly not their kind.

Poor Phil! For the first time since her marriage, she said the words. Poor Phil!

But why had he chosen her for his wife? That was the one weak link in the chain. *She* had chosen with eyes that were blindfolded. Also, she had gone because she thought that she was needed. But her husband's choice remained a mystery.

Well, he had chosen, and so had she. And that being the case, it behooved them both to make the best of it. Phil certainly had his gifts. If you buy a cherry tree, you don't expect it to bear cherries *and* peaches *and* apples *and* plums. You cannot have every variety of luscious fruit on the same tree.

Be content if your cherry tree bears you a goodly crop of its own particular fruit, and don't sigh for all the other harvests that you never had any right to demand.

Life, after all, was a wonderful, a miraculous gift. No one, except its owner, could really spoil it. The acts of others, important as they might sometimes seem, could never be vital as one's own acts were vital; they would always be extraneous matters. The world was full of interest and opportunity — and of love to seek and to give. Hearts might be sad and lonely but, as long as life lasted, *there was always hope ahead.* And above, there was faith — there was God.

Alison rose and carried the now sleeping child to his crib. As she bent over the little form, she resolved that her son should be so trained that he should be her crown of joy, and she whispered a prayer for guidance.

Down-stairs, Gertrude was waiting to carry her off. The motor would return later for little Philippse and his nurse, and they could all come home together in the late afternoon. Ken had gone to the city for the day and Gertrude was so lonely without him that she must have company. Besides which, she would rather be with her sister Alison than with any one in the world, save her husband and her son.

In the old days, Alison used to think (together with most persons) that nothing could be more beautiful that Gertrude Terry. Gertrude Rawle proved the fallacy of this belief; her dazzling loveliness

threw her maiden beauty quite into the shade. Even a plain woman may be transformed by happiness; and Gertrude's happiness was absolute.

As she and Alison drove through the wide, shady streets of Coningsboro, every foot of ground recalled some old memory. Since Alison's return, not a day had passed without a meeting of these two sisters, and yet they were never "talked out."

"There's the corner where I first met Ken face-to-face and talked to him," said Gertrude. "He was in riding-clothes. Did I tell you that I am to have riding-lessons? He is devoted to horses; so we are to ride together."

"Do you know, Gertsie, everything looks so different to me that it doesn't seem possible that I have been away less than two years. I don't notice it so much at home; the rectory and church are just the same as ever. But even there I keep measuring up their ideas of life — which were my own former ones — against things as they really are, out in the world."

"I know," responded Gertrude, nodding her head; "it is not the same thing at all."

"Was our innocent preparation for life good or bad, do you think? Of course, it was not adequate. But, in the case of your own children, would you let them think everything was ideal until their eyes were opened by force; or would you pull their eyes open yourself, in order to save them a later shock?" asked Alison.

"I should do precisely as Mother and Father did — keep them entirely innocent of evil just as long as possible."

"I knew you would say that," cried Alison joyfully. "So should I. In the first place, they have those happy years; and, in the second place, I'm sure that the effect of them is never lost. In some mysterious way, it is a permanent safeguard. Don't you think so?"

"I know it. The longer your acquaintance with evil, the less evil it seems."

"Exactly. There was a time when I thought that I had been unfairly treated by being wilfully blinded. Now I know that it was best. And what is more, Gertsie, Mother and Father don't know half as much about the world as we do ourselves."

"That's the exact point. I find myself constantly on guard before them, for fear I may thoughtlessly wound them or shock them."

(Gertrude's mask, then, was discarded in her own home, but assumed in the home of her parents.)

Then they fell to talking of lighter things.

"The streets," said Alison, "look the same, and yet not the same. They are just as wide and just as shady, but there is a different air about them. I don't suppose you notice it, because you weren't away from them so long."

"Indeed, I did notice it. Even after a three months' absence, I felt it. Do you see how many motors there are now?"

"I know. It's perfectly remarkable. They are flying all over the place."

"The Russells started that. Unless, indeed, we did. But Leila and her mother couldn't rest until they had one; and then it seemed no time at all until the whole place had followed suit. Poor Elsa! It's

awfully hard on her. Roscoe can't afford one, and she feels it so."

At the mention of Elsa's name, a shade passed over Alison's face, but she said nothing.

"Here is the new Country Club," continued Gertrude. "That is the greatest innovation of all. Nearly every party is given there now. Roscoe is crazy over golf. I wish Elsa would take it up."

"I wish she would. It would give them that interest in common. Leila Russell says that Ros spends most of his evenings at that other new club — the men's club."

Gertrude turned, and her eyes met Alison's. Then she nodded, and there was a little silence.

"Here we are," cried the younger sister presently. "And there's my darling. Bring him here, Nannie, and let him speak to his Aunt Alison."

Gertrude's son was now nearly seven months old, and no little prince of royal blood was ever more fêted and petted. His parents, his little stepbrother and stepsister, and every servant in the establishment, all worshipped at his shrine.

A staid Englishwoman in nurse's livery brought him over to receive his aunt's homage, and he cooed, and smiled, and gurgled, just as if he knew all about his own importance and rejoiced in it.

"How beautiful your home is, Gertrude dear," said Alison. "Have you a single care in the whole world?"

"Not one. Unless you'd call little Kenny's temper a 'care.' I'm making it my special care now, and I'm sure he'll come out all right in a year or two. He's been horribly spoiled, you know; left to

nurses and given everything that money could buy. You should just have seen him when anything displeased him. He would clench his little fists, and his whole face would be convulsed with passion. I'm teaching him to control his impatience, and, in time, I'm sure his temper fits will be gone."

(So little Ken, aged six and a half, was already being fitted to a mask. A necessary one, to be sure, but what a baby he seemed to have one of any kind!)

"How about Dodo?" asked Alison.

"She's the sweetest child in the world. I don't believe she has a fault. But her extreme sensitiveness will make her miserable unless she learns to control it. And she is learning. She's trying hard not to give way to every feeling."

(Another baby mask!)

After luncheon, the two sisters went out on to one of the beautiful furnished piazzas for their coffee. Alison, looking across the velvety sward and at the wonderful old trees, breathed a sigh of content. Her own son and Gertrude's son were being wheeled by their respective nurses into the shadows for an afternoon airing. Dodo and Kennie rode off on their ponies in charge of the groom, blowing farewell kisses to their new mother and their Aunt Alison. All was peace and happiness.

"How I should love to have a country home," sighed the New York prisoner.

"Why don't you? There are lovely homes outside of New York. Ken says Morristown is charming, but that he himself would rather live up the

Hudson. Why don't you move out there, somewhere?"

"We can't afford it," replied Alison.

"Oh, can't you? What a shame. I supposed Phil had quite a big income. He grew so famous with his 'Inca' and his 'Mountebanks.'"

"An author's income," responded Alison carefully, "is variable. It is too uncertain to warrant anything but a very average expenditure. It is not like a settled income, or even like a salary. And then, New York is so horribly expensive. You can't do nearly as much there, on a given sum, as you can in other places."

"Yes, of course. I suppose that if Phil lived up to his highest earnings, he'd get into trouble when times weren't so good. So in good times, he must always be saving towards those that are less prosperous."

"Precisely. Payments are so irregular."

"I see. It must be awfully interesting to have Phil read his work to you before he sends it out. And you are so clever, you are surely a great help to him."

"He doesn't need my help. His style is wonderful," said Phil's wife. "Oh, Gertsie," she went on impulsively, "there is something that I wish you'd get Ken to do for me."

Gertrude looked up with a quick look of comprehension.

"I know. He must. He will. It's all wrong that our husbands should not be on good terms. I'll manage Ken, and you must manage Phil. Phil will have to come half way."

"Of course," said Alison.

"You see, we may be in New York quite a bit next winter, and it would be too horrid not to have everything nice and smooth between them."

"In New York? You and Ken?" Alison tried to speak enthusiastically.

"Yes. I'm not sure, though. We're not going to stay in the country, anyhow. Mother and Father don't know that yet, and I hate to break it to them. We shall still keep this place for the summers. But the children are quite well and strong now, and they should be at school with other children of their age. And Ken is wild to take me out in society. He is so foolish, dear old thing, he says he wants to exhibit me. So we are planning to open the town house and entertain a lot. And we are going South. But probably we shall be in New York off and on."

"You lucky girl," said Alison. "I don't envy you your parties in town, but I do most awfully envy you the chance to travel."

"My dear, you must do it, the minute your baby is old enough. It's the most wonderful thing in the world. And with your mind, you'd see things that I'd never see. Allie, I wish Elsa could travel. Just enough to get out of the rut she's fallen in. She seems to think that it matters such a lot whether she sits on her hostess' right or left, at a Conings-boro luncheon-party. And she isn't a bit happy. She'll end by making a mess of her life. They say that Ros is away from home a lot, and it's almost certainly Elsa's fault if he is, for you know how perfectly devoted he used to be to her. I wish

you'd talk to Elsa. She wouldn't take advice from me; you remember we used to rub each other somewhat in the old rectory days. And now that I have so much more worldly gear, Elsa simply can't stand me."

"Oh, Gertrude, don't say such things."

"It's true. Before we've talked ten minutes, she's on edge. And I'm perfectly certain it isn't my fault. It never happens between me and any one else in the world; and it constantly happens between Elsa and others. I know that I could never make her believe that I regard my money as the least of my blessings. You talk to her about things, won't you?"

"Yes, I will," promised Alison. "I am lunching there to-morrow — just alone with Elsa — and I'll try to make an opportunity."

"There's another thing," pursued Gertrude rather slowly. "I do wish Elsa were fonder of children. Ros adores them so; he nearly eats Terry up every time he comes out here, and Elsa always seems to take it as a personal insult. And then Mother and Father adore the babies so. When you're gone, and I'm gone, I don't know what in the world they'll do."

And then a carload of visitors arrived and ended sisterly confidences.

CHAPTER IX

ELSA BARTOW'S greeting to her sister, the next day, was not auspicious.

"You'll find it very different here from what it is at Gertrude's," she said. "I have the simplest of homes, and no motor to send for my guests."

Her voice had taken on an edge that was not pleasant. Her girlhood voice had been rather sweet.

"I'm quite used to walking," smiled Alison. "I have no motor, either."

"No. But New York is full of public conveyances."

"I use none except the street cars and the busses. Cousin Mary Gansevoort and Kathleen Mortimer used to offer me their carriages and motors, but I got to declining them because it counted up so, to keep tipping."

"Why, Alison," said her sister, "you talk as if you were poor."

"I am," answered Alison cheerfully. "Quite the poorest of the three Terry girls, in spite of the fact that I was once called an heiress."

This rather took the wind out of Elsa's sails.

"You're joking, of course," she remarked feebly.

"I wish I were. Look here, Elsa, I'm going to take you into my confidence. I shall tell you a few things that I've never told to any one else, but I want your promise never to repeat them. It's not

that I'm ashamed of them; but, in the first place, they would worry the family; in the second place, it's no one's business how much or how little Phil and I spend; and, in the third place, Coningsboro minds could not grasp New York prices."

Then she told about the uncertainty of an author's income, the necessity of saving up for a rainy day, and the awful expense of everything in New York.

"For instance," she concluded, "to live as you live would cost us three or four times what it costs you. What do you pay your servant?"

"My one poor servant!" said Elsa. "I pay her four and a half a week!"

"And she does everything?"

"Yes, practically everything."

"Well, in New York, she wouldn't touch the washing, nor the ironing, nor the furnace, and you'd pay her at least thirty-five dollars a month! To that, you'd have to add your laundry, and the services of a furnace man. Food is higher, rent is higher, taxes are higher, everything is higher!"

Elsa looked rather crestfallen. She had not the sole option on poverty, after all.

"And you actually pay your maid thirty-five dollars a month?" she asked.

"Elsa, I have your promise not to repeat a word that I say to you? Not to any living soul?"

"Certainly."

"I've never kept a servant in my life, except for one month after my baby was born."

"Alison!"

"It is true."

"Who did your work?"

"I had a charwoman once a week. We usually ate our dinners in a restaurant. And the rest of the work I did myself."

"Alison!"

"It's perfectly true."

At this moment, the comfortable-looking middle-aged maid came to announce luncheon, which was very dainty and charmingly served. The frequent entrances of this woman forced the conversation into less personal channels until it was resumed later in Elsa's pretty boudoir.

That afternoon's talk between the two sisters had much to do with a change in Elsa Bartow's way of life; just how much, she herself probably never realized.

She was at the precise point where she needed a jolt. Constantly comparing her lot with that of her brilliant and lucky younger sister, she was in strong danger of developing a wishbone in place of a backbone.

At the end of some two hours, Alison rose to go.

"Now, Elsa," she said, "I want you to promise me to stop fretting yourself to death; and do take up golf, no matter whether you hate it or not. Use it as a means to an end. It will take you out of yourself and give you a new interest. And it will be simply lovely for you and Roscoe to play together."

"I'd be a perfect dub at it."

"Never you mind what you are. Every one here is beginning; you won't feel awkward. And the less you know, the more there'll be for Ros to show

you. Gertrude is going to learn to ride, just to please Ken."

"Oh, Gertrude! She loves exercise, anyhow. And she knows how stunning she'll look on a horse."

"That's not the reason at all, Elsa dear. She wants to do the things that Ken enjoys. She never lets down. She loves him so much, and so wisely, that she is constantly trying to make herself attractive to him. She doesn't sit down and rest, just because she has got him."

"There's one thing about Gertrude that makes me tired. The way she flaunts that baby of hers —"

"Oh, Elsa dear, how can you say such things. Gertrude doesn't *flaunt* it. If she did, it would not be a crime. A baby is a possession that nearly any young wife may have, if she wants it. It is a wonderful possession too. Take my word for that."

"A wonderful possession if you can give it an English maid, and every known luxury, and drive it around in carriages and motors, and —"

"A wonderful possession whether you can give it such things or not. If you have to bathe and dress your own child, and wheel his coach yourself, and sit up with him when he cries at night, your child is still the most priceless treasure that you can possibly have. Good-bye, dear, I've had a lovely time. I hope I'm not going home to envy you this darling house of yours."

As Alison walked down the sun-flecked street, her sister went back into the shaded library and sat down. And presently she was lost in a brown study that lasted until her husband came home.

If Alison Howland had needed corroboration of her statement that little Philippse was a priceless treasure, it could have been supplied by appeal to Judge Howland and Aunt Debbie. They idolized the boy. Every day, the old Howland carriage came around to take Alison and the baby for an airing. Sometimes the Judge went with them, sometimes not; it depended upon whether business kept him in the office. But whenever the little grandson came to his grandfather's house, he found his host at home, waiting to be his slave. The old man's face would soften till one could wonder if it had ever really been fierce.

Aunt Debbie hunted up every old toy the attic contained, and she spent her days knitting jackets and leggings for use in the coming winter.

"You'll coddle him to death," the grandfather growled, but Aunt Debbie's face showed plainly that she was happier than she had been for years. Watching the group, the words flashed into Alison's mind, "And a little child shall lead them." She made up her mind that those baby hands should lead father and grandfather to a speedy reconciliation.

In the Judge's carriage, behind his fat lazy bays, she revisited all the old scenes. She passed the hills where she and Phil had watched the winter sunset across the snow. Maybe, after all, he had truly felt those words about the Kingdom of Purity. Perhaps it was something better than mere eloquence. He might, like the rest of the world, find it hard to strike a balance between precept and practice. He might be a little weaker than some others, when it came to the pinch; but if he had

the feelings and the perception, that, surely, was something!

One afternoon Alison sat in the carriage looking out over a view that she used to consider the most beautiful that she had ever seen. And it was beautiful. But gazing, she knew beyond doubt that never again could Coningsboro life satisfy her. She had grown. She had *out*grown, and the pain that attended the process had, perhaps, been her growing-pain.

She could look at the view with the same appreciation as of yore, but she could never be content with it for the same length of time. Inevitably there would come the realization that somewhere life was throbbing; and with the realization would be the restless longing to be in the thick of it. There was too much to do, too much to learn, too much to see, to allow beautiful views to form a permanent diet.

She didn't envy Elsa anything. She didn't envy Gertrude anything but her ability to travel and her perfect happiness. And as for the travel, it was coming some day.

No, she honestly didn't know a single soul with whom she would be willing to change places. Why, then, should she be pitied — by herself or any one else?

About one thing, however, she did feel serious concern. She could not fail to notice the curtailment of expenditure in Judge Howland's household — the simpler fare, the absence of a second maid. She was sure that Phil's allowance necessitated it, and the conviction caused her a sharp pang. She

and Phil must manage to get along without that money just as soon as they possibly could. Just now, because of the baby, she didn't see how it could be done; but it was an object for which she must constantly strive. Oh, if only Phil could make more money! If only she could make some herself!

When Phil came up in late September, he stayed some ten days. He entered his father's house again, just as though there had never been any break, and he was welcomed — not received on tolerance. No one but Alison ever knew what tact and persistence had been necessary to bring Phil to this point.

To the Rawles' also he went, to the great delight of both Gertrude and Alison. As Kenneth Rawle liked everything that made his wife happy, it is fair to assume that the healed breach gave him pleassure too.

In fact, it was quite a wrench when the Howlands took themselves off in early October. The summer had been one of life's successes.

Mrs. Terry insisted on preparing a luncheon-basket to tide over the home-coming.

"You'll find nothing waiting for you," she reminded them. "Delia and Ellen have been so happy in getting this ready. And here is a postal, Alison dear, that I want you to mail the moment you reach New York. I have addressed it to myself. It will let me know that you have arrived safely, and you can take your time about writing. The baby will give you enough to do. I wish you would take a maid down with you."

"No, no, Mother dear. I really don't need one

for the trip. The food, though, will be lovely to have for our first meal at home. And I won't forget to mail the postal."

The baby, fortunately, still depended on his mother for his meals, so the inconveniences of going back to an empty apartment were reduced to a minimum.

CHAPTER X

THE Howlands reached Jersey City just as the October night was falling. Alison kept thinking of that other October evening, exactly two years ago, when she had seen New York for the first time.

The trip had been warm and tiresome, and they were glad to stand outside while crossing the river. The front deck being crowded, they betook themselves to the after deck and had it all to themselves. Not a soul was in sight.

The moon was just rising and gilding a path across the swiftly flowing water. A slight breeze that had sprung up fanned their faces gratefully. Alison leaned against the rail, clasping her son in her arms, while Phil arranged their various pieces of hand luggage around him on the floor.

"Give me the little fellow," he said. "Gad, how he's grown. He's really heavy, isn't he?"

"Yes. And awfully strong. His little spine is just like steel. Hold him tight, dear. He gives such sudden twists."

As they drew nearer New York, Alison began to be assailed by doubts. She couldn't help remembering those horrible spring weeks when she had been unable to find a decent servant, and when everything had been upside down.

Of course, the baby was older now. The broken nights were a thing of the past. But the older he grew, the more constant watching he needed. You couldn't just put him down and let him sleep by the hour.

In the rectory, everything had gone smoothly. But there, good servants were always at one's beck and call. Everything ran as on greased wheels. No one was hurried or worried. And, in consequence, no one was irritable.

Alison stood with her face turned toward the moonlit sky. No one spoke. Becoming vaguely conscious of a movement at her side, the young wife turned and saw her husband supporting the baby on the rail, while he prepared to shift the weight from one arm to the other. She had just opened her lips to say, "Take care, dear," when a puff of wind blew Phil's hat from his head. Instinctively, he raised his hand to seize it. And in one sickening half-second, the horrible thing had happened. There was a lurch — a little form falling backwards — a wild clutch and cry from Alison — a sharp baby scream — and then nothing but the wake of frothy water beaten into soapsuds by the boat's paddle wheel — that, and the swiftly rushing, seaward flowing current of the river.

Alison felt herself sinking, while millions of hammers began to beat in her brain. For a lightning-flash she seemed to know nothing, and then she saw her husband, white, wild-eyed, hatless, preparing to jump into the water.

The sight restored her tottering reason. Instantly she realized the futility of effort — not its risk, but

its absolute futility. The moment the thing had happened, it was already too late for rescue. *Rescue was impossible!*

Seizing Phil with both hands, she put forth all her strength to hold him.

"Stop it," she whispered, and her breath came in a sharp hiss. "Stop it. You can do nothing. *You can't swim. And it is over. Over.*" And then, without an idea of what she was doing, she began to repeat aloud, "God, let it be over! God, let it be over! God, let it be over!"

Together they stood, shaking as in an ague, almost unconscious of time and place. Alison had but one definite thought; no one could help them, so *no one must know!*

They remained thus, paralyzed, until the sounds of clanking chains announced that the boat was nearly in. Presently came the thumping and grinding against the wharf. Horses' feet and heavy drays began to move, and the hurrying rush of human footsteps told that every one would soon be ashore.

"Come," said Alison, dragging herself with an effort out of her vague aching numbness. "Come. We must go home."

She staggered as she walked. Phil obeyed her as might a person in a trance. Above everything else there rang in Alison's ears the sound of that one awful baby cry.

For years to come, she was destined to hear that cry in the echoing tread of feet and in the moan of the night wind. It would rise to her ears above the noise of crowded streets and the lilt of cadenced

song. Like Jeremiah of old, she would long mourn: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?"

Through the boat, across the ferry house, out on to the street, there went a strange couple. In front strode a long-legged, haggard, hatless man, loaded with bundles and blind to all that he passed. In his wake staggered a woman who looked as though she would drop in her tracks, empty-handed except for a child's coat and knitted blanket, which hung over her arm.

Phil paused near a cab, in a dazed sort of way.

"Get in," he said.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

The wild-looking man stared at him.

"I don't know," he answered.

("Crazy as a loon," thought the cabby.)

Alison gave the number; and that was all that either of them remembered till they found themselves, after repeated fumblings at the lock, in their own dark, empty apartment. Without waiting to divest themselves of their wraps, they sank into two chairs, and began to cry like a pair of children.

And that was their home-coming!

Alison was the first to rouse herself. She never knew whether it was after minutes or hours. Not a clock ticked in the apartment; the silence was terrible. There is nothing more appalling than sobrent silence.

As to the time, what did it matter? What did anything matter? What was the use of looking at a watch? There was nothing in the world but that awful cry and the awful truth.

She got her husband to make a light, and to help

her build a fire. Just as she raised her hands to take off her hat, a thought struck her, and she stopped.

"Phil," she said, "we must mail that postal to Mother!"

He turned his ravaged face on her.

"What are you going to do about all of them up there?" he asked.

"I don't know. We must think. The first thing is to get this postal off. Then, if they don't hear from us for three or four days, they'll think nothing of it. I can't stay here alone while you go out. We'll go together."

Together they went down to the street corner and back. They saw nothing that they passed. Dimly they realized that somewhere there was a city, and a street, and that the street had lights and noises. But the real world, of course, consisted of a horrible stretch of rushing black water, lighted in one narrow path only by the rising moon, and beaten into foam by the passage of a boat.

After they had taken off their wraps, they unpacked the luncheon basket and tried to eat. But that was prevented by those strange aching lumps in their throats. It was a useless and wearisome effort.

Phil went into the pantry and returned with two rather stiff doses of brandy. These they swallowed as one would swallow medicine.

Once on his feet, the man seemed restless. He wandered around the room, picking up books and trinkets, gazing at them with unseeing eyes, and then replacing them. At last, he sank again into a

chair, took his head between his hands, and gazed ahead of him with sombre eyes.

Alison finally insisted on bed for both of them. The ordinary routine of preparation was a weary drag, but it had to be gone through some time.

Oh, those nights! Those wretched, torturing nights when we seek to drown heart-ache in sleep. The sleep that won't come! The thoughts and pictures that won't flee! If there is anything worse than daylight for prolonging visions, it is darkness.

Exhaustion finally brought fitful slumber. Sleep was an ache; rousing into semi-consciousness was an ache; entire wakefulness was the most horrible ache of all.

When Alison went, in the early morning, to prepare her bath, the sight and the sound of the running water almost produced physical nausea. She had to brace herself against it with all her will.

The weary day dragged on, followed by other days scarcely less weary. On the fourth, Alison came to her husband with a sheet of paper in her hand.

"Read it, dear," she said.

His hand shook as he held it.

"Mother and Father,

"My baby is dead. Write to me, love me, comfort me. But never, as you care for me, ask me to speak or write of this again. Details are useless. The fact is all that matters.

"Tell the others for me. Don't come down. It would be impossible, in meeting, not to talk of that which I think it would kill me to discuss.

"ALISON."

As he handed the letter back, Phil went white to his very lips.

"Is that what you really want to do," he asked, "or are you shielding me? You mustn't. You must never think of that. Do whatever gives you most comfort."

"This is it," she said. "I could not bear anything else. I shall write to your father in just the same way."

He crossed to her side and took her in his arms.

"Alison," he said brokenly, "I don't believe there is another woman like you in the world."

One of the most wonderful of the many wonderful provisions of Providence is that Time softens edges and touches bleeding hearts with a healing finger. It is not that we forget. We never forget. But if early hurts were never even partially healed, later hurts would mean death. The ever accumulating wounds of life would grow too heavy to be borne.

By the time six weeks had passed, Alison could waken to the recurring days with some degree of courage to face them. She could bend a little of her mind to her daily tasks.

She was as thin and white as though she had dragged through months of illness, and her black dress accentuated her pallor. Phil's friends did not come often to the house in these days, and for that she was thankful. She and Phil spent day after day and evening after evening alone, except for each other.

Alison went to church nearly every day of her

life. When there was no service, she could at least spend an hour in prayer in the dim quiet place that always strengthened her courage.

It was a proof of the beauty of her faith that it never wavered. Never did she even ask herself what she had done that this punishment should have been meted to her. She knew that there must be bitter draughts in the cup of life, and that He who least merited sorrow had worn its thorny crown. She never questioned His love, and she never failed to find comfort in prayer. And thus to her was fulfilled the promise: "Ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope."

Phil had grown wonderfully gentle and thoughtful, for him. He spent all his evenings at home, for Alison wouldn't go out, and he wouldn't leave her. He worked more than he had ever done since their marriage. He drank less, because the surroundings did not tempt him to drink. When he went out on an errand, he nearly always brought back a few flowers or a little fresh fruit. He even insisted that Alison should have a servant.

And, as coincidences do sometimes occur even in real life, a servant presented herself almost at their very door.

Over on Sixth Avenue there was a delicatessen shop which the Howlands had patronized for two years. One day, following a long talk with Phil, Alison asked the German proprietor of this shop if he knew of a woman whom she could get for a general servant. He knew of no woman, but he knew of a maid — his own seventeen-year-old daughter, Lena — who had been well trained in

German house-wifery. As Mrs. Howland's servant she could live at home. Her father himself would come to fetch her each evening.

Lena proved a godsend, and her advent transformed the Howlands from peripatetic street wanderers into respectable home dwellers. Alison really marketed, and they both really ate. Alison's former predictions were verified by the fact that the new arrangement, even including Lena's wages and food, was less expensive than the old one.

Lena's mistress, however, began to feel time hanging heavy on her hands. She still read omnivorously and wrote much. But she couldn't write with the same preoccupation as before her sorrow. She found herself stopping and going into long fits of reverie, or wandering restlessly about the apartment.

She decided that she could get up a greater interest in her work if she had some spur in the shape of a specific object. She and Phil had a long talk, and it ended in Alison deciding, rather to her husband's horror, to take up some course at Columbia.

She chose a course in literature and was soon so interested that she decided to add to it. Some lectures in political economy next attracted her. The two subjects were great time eaters, and that was what she sought.

Often, for hours, the scratching of two pens and the rustle of paper would be the only sounds in the Howlands' apartment. When work was over, there were always plenty of questions to discuss together. Alison took special pains to draw out her husband's artistic preceptions, and she marvelled, meanwhile,

at his indifference to facts; she was struck by his quick fine sense of values no less than by his astonishing ignorance on subjects which had never interested him. His later education, having been self-conducted and desultory, had produced a strangely haphazard mental equipment. Without his naturally brilliant linguistic endowment, he would almost certainly have remained an ignorant man. Even with it, his intense laziness and dis-interest concerning subjects which did not appeal to him, left him most unevenly developed.

She studied him curiously, almost as a mother would study a child who, having apparently inherited from some unknown forebear, seems almost a stranger to her who bore him. Never had Alison succeeded in getting so close to her husband; never, even in the days of their engagement, had he been so much in her thoughts; and never, it is safe to say, had any one ever tried so conscientiously and so wisely to round him out.

Phil, on his side, studied his wife almost as closely. He saw sides of her mind that he had never before seen. They still disagreed on many subjects, but their arguments were stimulating to both of them. Phil Howland had always been distinctly prejudiced against clever females; but, when you came to live with one, it made a difference. This one didn't pall, at any rate.

Alison's birthday fell in August, and her father's latest birthday gift had been a cheque for a generous sum, which still remained untouched. She proceeded to use it as a means of hearing good music, and she developed an understanding taste

for the new school of composers who were just coming to be known in America. She would come out from a concert, tingling intellectually and emotionally, and walk home on air to tell Phil of the wonderful experience.

This taste of hers he did not share. Despite his quick appreciation of beautiful sound in words, music of that sort bored him. He liked melody and tune and sequence. On the other hand, his enjoyment of pictures and tapestries and statues was keener than Alison's. She studied them all with him, but her appreciation was not so great.

This was because of the difference of their natures. She appreciated with her mind, he with his senses. Even Alison's music excitement came from her brain, and she had, if possible, too little of sensuousness in her. Her keenest enjoyment was always intellectual rather than emotional. So that, if there is anything in the law of attraction between opposites, she and her husband were not so badly mated, after all.

One evening, as they sat chatting by their fireside, Keppner came in to make one of his rare visits. He had hardly been in the house three times since their return.

He carried an evening paper with him and laid it on the table. After a while, Alison picked it up and ran her eye over the first page. Suddenly, she caught her breath.

"Phil," she gasped, "listen to this: 'Married in San Francisco within twenty-four hours after securing Reno divorce. The beautiful Mrs. Shap-

leigh weds the multimillionaire, Samuel Q. Wilkins.' Did you ever know anything so scandalous?"

"Well, they keep doing it, you know," said her husband, taking the paper. "I should say that Mrs. Shapleigh was the exact person from whom you might expect it. If she didn't do something of the sort, it would be because she couldn't pull it off. This explains the way Shapleigh looked the other day. I met him down-town. He was seedy and shabby, and he'd been drinking. For the first time since I've known him, he seemed to want to avoid me. I noticed it particularly because, not having seen him for so long, I expected him to rush up and give me the glad hand."

"I think it is simply disgusting," cried Alison. "He was perfectly devoted to her. She has probably broken his heart."

"Do you know anything of this Wilkins chap, Al?" Phil demanded of his guest. "Is he really so rich? I suppose he must be, to have won the beauty."

"Yes. Untold millions, I believe. Chewing-gum."

"No!"

"Certainly. Haven't you seen the 'Wilkins clean breath' advertisements in the street cars?"

"Is that the man?"

"Yes."

"Then she doesn't leap into the lap of the four hundred?"

"Not she. Not yet, at any rate. Wilkins has a white marble palace up Fifth Avenue, but no one ever goes into it, they say."

"How old is he?"

"About sixty-five or seventy."

"Good Lord! He must have money."

"It's horrible," said Alison hotly.

"It's quite a game," responded Keppner.

All through that winter, Mrs. Wilkins' name continued to be flaunted in the newspapers. She was here, there, everywhere, stalking Fashion in its haunts. She entertained elaborately, and her lavish hospitality and wonderful toilets were constantly described. Mrs. Wilkins evidently employed a press agent, and saw to it that he earned his salary.

CHAPTER XI

In December, Phil received a note from the publishers who had brought out his "Inca." They asked for an immediate interview.

He went up to see them and came home tremendously excited.

"What do you suppose, Al," he said; "they want to dramatize it."

"Who do?"

"Wait. I'll tell you all about it. I'm so wrought up over it that I can hardly talk straight. Well, there's a California woman, a Mrs. Deverall, who has come to New York for the winter. She has all kinds of money, and has taken one of those huge palaces on upper Fifth Avenue — ballroom, and all that. I imagine she wants to pave her way into the Holy of Holies. Anyhow, she has made up her mind to give the most magnificent private entertainment that New York has ever seen — and that's saying quite a bit. And she wants it to be different from any thing that's ever been done. She has always been mad about my 'Inca,' and it occurred to her that it might be dramatized — adhering as closely as possible to my original words, you see, and copying the scenery absolutely from my descriptions. Jove, it's the chance of a lifetime. I can see it all now, in my mind's eye."

He was walking rapidly up and down the room

as he spoke, gesticulating violently. Alison had never seen him so excited. She noticed how much straighter he was holding himself, how much of his old stooping slouch had disappeared. The thought flashed into her mind that success was what was needed to make a man of him. He had had eight years of failure — for it was eight years since he wrote the later of his two big successes, and nearly ten since he wrote the earlier one. And since then, the world had been down on him. When the world stays down on a man too long, he is apt to get down on himself.

"I am to go to see this Mrs. Deverall to-morrow," resumed Phil, "at her house, by appointment. Great Scott, Al, I can hardly wait."

"I don't wonder, dear," she said heartily. "What time is your appointment?"

"Four o'clock in the afternoon. My first stipulation, naturally, will be that I shall make the dramatization myself. No one else shall touch it. They can have a stage manager, of course; they'll have to. But I shall do the writing. My head is full of it now. I'm going into the study to sketch a synopsis. Just imagine that scene in the Sun Temple, will you? It shall simply blaze with gold. And that one where the Inca goes up for his public examination when he is sixteen. The royal neophyte sleeping on the ground surrounded by his less illustrious companions; then the feats of strength in which he bests them all, and his inauguration as Inca. The old men piercing his ears with the golden bodkin, fitting the sandals on his feet, and placing in his head those two rare feathers that were the

insignia of royalty. He'll be all in scarlet and white and gold. Then the great body of the Inca nobility kneeling to him, one at a time, to show that he is received into their midst. Then come the songs, and dances, and public festivities."

He was beside himself with enthusiasm. His words almost tripped over each other in their hasty outpouring. He hurried on:

"And that scene where the Virgins of the Sun are watching over the sacred fire! . . . You know, if one of them were caught in an intrigue, she was buried alive, her lover was strangled and his town was razed to the ground—'sowed with stones' they called it. But all the Virgins of the Sun were brides of the Inca, if he wanted them. His palaces held not hundreds, but thousands, for his own personal pleasure. Well, you remember, this girl of mine succeeds in keeping her intrigue with her lover a secret. But she adores him. Then along comes the Inca and finds her desirable and, of course, she has no choice but to go with him and be shut up in one of his palaces. And then, when he dies, she is one of the four thousand favorite concubines picked out to be immolated on his tomb. And the task of her particular immolation is entrusted to the lover whom she still adores, and who adores her. . . . Oh, it's simply immense! Run and get me Prescott's 'Conquest of Peru,' Al, and bring it into the study. The first volume. And that *Histoire de Péron* of Balboa's. And there's an English translation there, somewhere, of a history of Fernandez. In it, I think you'll find some manuscript notes of mine. Look them over, won't you,

and sort out all those sheets where you see the name Huayna Capac. He's my man. The last of the Incas. By Gad, if this doesn't turn out to be the most beautiful thing that has ever been seen in New York, it won't be my fault."

When Phil returned next evening from his interview with Mrs. Deverall, he was more excited than ever. That ballroom was going to prove a wonderful place for the production. Expense meant nothing whatever to the rich Californian. She rolled in wealth. Just at this point, the narrator pulled himself up short.

"I'll give you three guesses what my own particular fee for this thing is to be," he said.

"Oh, I couldn't guess," replied his wife. "I shouldn't have an idea what to say. What is it?"

"No, no. I want you to guess. Remember, I myself write the drama from my own poem. I make all the suggestions for the setting. I give up the greater part of my very valuable time, from now to the date of production — about the middle of February. Mrs. Deverall, in speaking of the time that I should have to devote to it, and of my literary reputation — herself brought up the subject of my compensation. I had no more idea what to demand than you have. Guess what I asked — and got."

"Oh, Phil, I don't know. Two hundred dollars?"

Her husband regarded her with a smile of compassion.

"Five thousand," he said.

"*Five thousand dollars!* Philippse Howland! You didn't!"

"I certainly did. And I believe I could have asked even more. You see, Al, it's like this. A man's private finances are his own concern. Money is not necessarily the measure of success, but in the eyes of the world it is always taken to be. If people think you have a lot, they call you successful. If you are successful, they're all eager to help make you more so. But if you are a failure, they'll have nothing to do with you.

"Very well, then. I'm either a success or a failure; in the first case, I'm desirable; in the second case, I'm not. The determining factor is whether or not I'm making money. And that, I, alone can tell.

"If I'm making money, every minute of my time is valuable. Any one who wants it must pay well for it. To let it go cheaply would be to acknowledge that it was worth little.

"I looked around that establishment and realized that money meant nothing to its owner. It evidently flowed like water. My hostess was decked, even in the afternoon and in her own house, with pearls and emeralds that must have been worth a king's ransom. She would spend twice five thousand dollars on a new motor, without a second thought, though she probably has a dozen of them already. The moment I named my price — I did it as calmly as I could — I saw that I had made no mistake. And I'm going to earn it. From her standpoint, the thing will be well worth it."

"I see," said Alison. "Well, it is certainly won-

derful. The marvel to me is that you never before thought of dramatizing the thing yourself."

"The expense! And finding some one to produce it. Then, too, it's too short for a Broadway drama. It's just a brilliant, horribly costly *morçeau*. And here is everything made to order. Mrs. Deverall wants a piece that won't take much over an hour to give, and she wants it dazzingly beautiful. The expense doesn't count. I couldn't possibly have struck a softer snap. Here's my producer, seeking me. Here's a purse that has no bottom, one that precludes all necessity of makeshift; here will be an audience that will seek to be amused for just about the length of time that it will take to give my piece. And I, personally, assume no risks. I am *in*sured against loss, and *as*sured of a good fat profit. It's wonderful."

Then he fell to telling his wife of some of the details.

The music was to be principally chants, temple-music, and dances. Old Peruvian — not too savage; weird, rather, and plaintive. Mrs. Deverall was to consult musicians about composition, orchestration, and singers.

"It will probably be composed specially for the occasion. I told her to be particularly careful about the music that accompanies the wail of the Vestals of the Sun when the sacred fire is found to be extinguished. That, you know, always forboded imminent disaster. In my piece, it immediately precedes the death of the Inca."

"Oh," cried Alison excitedly, "that should all be on strings and one muffled drum like a tom-tom.

The accompaniment should be in minor chords, and the wail should be written in descending chromatic passages, like those concluding bars in Saint Saens' 'Samson et Delila.'"

From that day on, "The Inca" was almost the daily meat and drink of the Howlands. Phil was scarcely at home except in the mornings. His afternoons and evenings were full of consultations and rehearsals. He frequently rushed home at dusk, just to jump into evening clothes and hurry out again for dinner. He had less compunction about leaving his wife than he would have had if she had been alone in the house. Lena, however, while she lessened the solitude, was scarcely a *companion* for her mistress.

When Phil was at home, he talked Inca continuously. Although Alison was frequently consulted, it never crossed his mind that she might be personally interested in the business-meetings or rehearsals. And as to the great representation itself, that was, naturally, for Mrs. Deverall's friends and acquaintances. Even had Alison been invited, her mourning would have precluded acceptance.

Phil did some rather surprising things. For instance, he went to an expensive Fifth Avenue tailor and ordered a lot of new clothes. This was explained to Alison very sensibly; the dress standards of the people he was now meeting so constantly were quite different from those of the friends with whom he had formerly consorted. To be prosperous, one must look prosperous. And, of course, he could afford, now, to dress better.

There was one thing his wife could hardly fail

to notice constantly, and that was how greatly he was improved by prosperity. But though his finer self was now dominant, his character still showed lack of basic strength. His moods always were the reflex of the opinions of others. He could be cast into savage depths by animadversion, and lifted to heights of pleasure by praise. And, just at present, he was breathing the incense of constant adulation.

Seeing all this, Alison realized that in order to achieve his possible best, he must always be made to believe in himself. At first this seemed strange to her. She, herself, cared little for the approval of outsiders; only when coming from those she loved did praise affect her. Obstacles, to her, were things to be overcome. Place one in her way, and she would immediately begin to work the harder, in order to get over it. Place one in Phil's way, and he would swear, and lie down on the near side of it.

But natures differ. The way to help a man is to understand him. And every new day helped Alison Howland to a better understanding of her husband.

The great affair was to take place on the tenth of February. Alison realized that she would see little or nothing of her husband until it was over.

On the morning of the eleventh, he was full of it. It had been completely successful. Long columns with "scare" headlines were on the front pages of all the morning papers. Phil bought a copy of every one of them. His name appeared repeatedly, and always accompanied by flattering compliments. He was called "the famous author,

Philippse Howland," and many were the prophesies of his future brilliant career as a dramatist. Phil devoured them all and longed for more. Fame is another thing for which "the appetite comes in eating."

Now that it was all over, Alison looked forward to having her husband settle down at home with her, and (she hoped), to work. She wanted him to continue to produce successes and not simply to live on past ones.

But not at all. Phil was in the house as little as ever. She scarcely saw him.

One day she asked him where he spent all his time, and when he intended to get back to work.

To her surprise, he hesitated quite a bit, and then said that Mrs. Deverall was purchasing a number of tapestries and pictures and wanted his advice about them.

Some two weeks after the Inca affair, Alison received a note from Kathleen Mortimer, begging her to come to luncheon. Mrs. Mortimer was on the eve of going South. Her departure had been delayed because "Billy" had hurt an eye at squash, and semiweekly visits to a big oculist had been necessitated by the accident. But now all was well, and they would soon be off.

Alison and her hostess were alone at luncheon.

"I hoped I might see you at that wonderful affair at Mrs. Deverall's," said Mrs. Mortimer.

Alison indicated her black gown.

"Yes, I know. But I thought you might just come for the show and hurry off before the dancing. Your husband was so tremendously in evidence.

How remarkably well he looks. I scarcely knew him."

"He had been desperately ill not long before you first met him," replied Alison, "and he hadn't really recovered. He does look well. And he was so interested over that production at Mrs. Deverall's. It must have been exquisite."

"It was. I have never seen anything so beautiful. The scenes were really gorgeous."

"You know Mrs. Deverall, then?" asked Alison idly.

"Well, yes, I know her. Though she would have asked me just the same if I didn't. She's dynamiting her way into society, you know; and she has the price to do it and, I should say, the temperament. Rather impervious to snubs. And we are all such savages that we permit her to entertain us gorgeously, and then, if we don't feel like seeing her again, we never go near her. But that's her own lookout. She's making a bid for the entrée to our houses, and we're simply looking her over what she has to offer in order to decide whether or not we think it's worth while. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Rather," nodded Alison. "It is pretty far from the Arab courtesy between host and guest, isn't it?"

"Isn't it? It's really horribly ill-bred. But one drifts into it gradually. And really, Alison, the bids for our favor are so blatant and so crude that we are warranted in giving an occasional snub. Here we are, a coterie of people who know each other intimately. Along comes an outsider and tries to jump straight into our laps. We brush her

off as we might brush an over-eager lap-dog that was making itself offensive."

"Yes, of course. That's all right. You don't have to make friends unless you want to. But to go! You surely don't have to do that."

"No, of course not. But by going, we repay. A woman like Mrs. Deverall would barter her soul just to get us beneath her roof, to let others see us there, and then to announce the happy fact in print to those countless thousands who haven't the chance to know it otherwise. Our mere presence is her reward. And, as for our side of it, we simply go to be amused."

Alison shook her head with a smile. It didn't sound very convincing to her.

"For my own part," continued her pretty hostess, "I shall probably take some more decent means of discharging my social debt to Mrs. Deverall. I've been let out of it, so far, by the fact that Billy hurt his eye the very day after her party. And now I'm flying off. When I come back, she may be established. And, even if she isn't, she has plenty of time ahead of her. She's young yet."

"She is?" cried Alison. "Why, how strange! I imagined her a gray-haired woman."

"You did?" replied Mrs. Mortimer. "No, you were quite wrong. She is a widow of not more than thirty and, some people think, very stunning-looking. Personally, I hate her style."

Alison couldn't tell just why this speech gave her a vague feeling of discomfort, but it did. It kept popping up in the back of her mind all the time that she was talking of other things.

When she rose to go, her cousin insisted on driving her home. And, as it was still early, they went first for a spin in the Park.

Just as they were emerging on their way downtown, they passed a very beautiful car at the Park entrance.

"There's Mrs. Deverall now," whispered Mrs. Mortimer hurriedly.

All that Alison could see was a gorgeously-dressed woman with dark hair and eyes. Not quite all, either. She saw her own husband seated by Mrs. Deverall's side.

It wasn't a very remarkable sight, and yet it startled her. For the balance of the drive, she made conversation with her lips and occupied her mind with her new bit of knowledge. At her own door, good-byes were exchanged, and Mrs. Mortimer drove off. She was starting South in three days and wouldn't return for a month or so.

And now Alison had a new subject for thought, one to which she devoted much time during the ensuing solitary weeks.

She wasn't a suspicious woman, and she wasn't a jealous one. But she was just, and she had a very distinct sense of the meaning of the words "mine" and "thine." Probably not a wife in the world, in Alison's place, would have failed to suspect that all was not well.

One April day, Phil went out about noon, very much dressed, and announcing that he would not be home till night.

After his departure, Alison went to his study to look for a book. On the floor by his desk lay a

crumpled sheet of gray note paper, face-up and open. It had evidently been stuffed into a pocket from which it had dropped.

Had it been in an envelope, Alison would never have dreamed of taking it out. Nor would she have stooped to looking through a drawer, or a pocket, in search of a missive. But her eye involuntarily swept this open note.

It began without preamble, thus:

"Come to me to-morrow, dear, straight up to my boudoir."

And the signature was "Lilian."

That was all. But it was quite enough.

Alison stood for a moment, struck dumb, and then she knew exactly what she was going to do. She didn't come to a decision, because there was no question. She simply knew beyond all doubt that there was only one course that she could possibly take. There was no alternative. She was going home to Coningsboro.

With her departure, her husband's entire income ceased. She didn't care. He had his money from the "Inca"; but even if he hadn't had a cent in the world, it would have been just the same. She was going home to Coningsboro.

It didn't take her long to pack her trunks, because she made no attempt to take anything except her clothes. When she had nearly finished, she sent Lena out for an expressman. She knew that there was a four o'clock train to Coningsboro, and she was going to catch it.

On Lena's return, her mistress told her that she might take the afternoon for a holiday.

"I'll give you your next week's wages," said Alison, opening her purse, "and you can have the day off."

Lena, overcome with gratitude, flew around setting things straight. Inside of fifteen minutes, she had left the house.

Alison put on her hat, then took the letter which she had found, and smoothed the creases from it. She pinned it against the frame of the mirror on her husband's chiffonier; he could hardly fail to see it the moment he entered the room. It was the only message she left. Not a line did she write in explanation.

The expressman had barely departed with her trunks, when another ring announced the carriage which she had ordered. It was early, but she felt that she would rather go and wait at the ferry house.

Arrived there, she had forty minutes to spare, even after buying her ticket and checking her trunks. She decided to cross on the first boat and to wait on the other side of the river. During all this time, she had never once let herself think; she had simply acted. Her thinking could be done on the train. There would be ample time.

She considered telegraphing her mother that she was coming, but decided against it. Telegrams were rare at St. Mary's Rectory, and their receipt was always attended with nervousness. If Alison walked in upon them, alive and well, her parents could hardly be worried about her.

She heard the noises that announced the arrival of a boat, and, following the crowd, she boarded it.

When she was once on, she began to shiver. It was the first time she had seen the river, or a ferry boat, since that home-coming, last October.

The deck, of course, was impossible. She took a seat in the cabin and sat with clenched hands and sick heart.

Arrived at the terminal, she found that the gate to her train would not open for nearly half an hour. She did not buy a paper, she did not sit down. She simply walked up and down the long concourse, her traveling-bag in her hand. It was heavy but she scarcely noticed it.

At last she saw the crowd surging in the direction of her gate, and she turned and joined it. She had just reached the wicket, just held out her ticket to the gateman, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, she faced her husband.

"Come home," he said.

She shook her head and averted her eyes.

"Come home, I say," he repeated.

"I am going to Coningsboro," she told him.

"You are not. You are coming with me."

She never could understand why, but she turned and followed him a little way, just enough to be apart from the crowd.

"Alison," he said, "I have been a fool, but you have been a worse one. And I got here just in time to prevent your making the biggest blunder of your life."

She didn't say a word. She simply stood and looked at him.

"Listen to me," and he held her with his eyes. "I am not going to talk until we are home. But I

swear to you, on my honor, that you have no cause to leave me. I have done nothing to warrant it."

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

For a second she hesitated. Then she turned and handed him her bag.

"Very well," she said, "I will come back with you."

Just as they got to the boat slip, she paused.

"My trunks," she exclaimed. Then she told him about them.

"Never mind," he replied. "I'll telegraph the Coningsboro agent that it was a mistake and tell him to hold them. Then I'll mail him your checks and have him express the trunks, C. O. D. Come on. The boat is in."

During the whole of the return trip, they scarcely spoke. Once arrived in their own home, Phil opened his lips.

"Now," he said. "I'll tell you everything. I've been an ass, but nothing worse. Sit down and listen to me."

The recital ended, Alison realized that her husband had spoken truly. She had, indeed, been on the edge of making the most appalling mistake of her life.

Mrs. Deverall, it appeared, was the sort of woman who must always be seen with a man dangling after her. Having no husband, it behooved her to find another cavalier — possibly permanent, possibly temporary.

She had not an idea that Philippse Howland was

married. At this, his wife stared. "Never knew you were married?" she repeated.

"No," replied Phil naïvely. "She never asked me, and I never told her. At first, you see, there was no question of anything personal. We just talked drama. And then, one day, she called me 'dear' and put her hand on mine. And after that she generally called me something like that." He grinned as he said it.

"And what did you call her?" asked Alison curiously.

"I didn't call her anything. I swear to you, Al, that all the advances came from her, and she never got very far, at that."

He proceeded, with the utmost frankness, to tell her all the details of the friendship. Mrs. Deverall had taken to receiving him in her boudoir for tea, apparently because she had a number of beautiful negligées which she could wear nowhere else. The meetings had been scarcely more intimate than they would have been in one of the drawing-rooms. The singular detachment with which he related everything convinced Alison that he was speaking the truth. She knew, in her heart, what cold comfort Mrs. Deverall must have had in her one-sided love-making. In sooth, Alison remembered that her own courtship by Phil had been conducted along strikingly original lines. He was not a man of endearments.

"You see," said Phil, "she was new in New York, and I think she imagined that I was much more important than I am. Whenever she saw me, they were all asking my opinion and hanging on

my words, and throwing me bouquets; they were doing it because of her money; and then she did it because they did it. And among them, I was quite a Grand Mogul and, of course, she thought that was my usual line. Then when the papers came out with all that stuff about me, she was sure she had a prize."

"What was your engagement with her to-day?"

"Oh, at half-past twelve we were to look at a sun-dial and some urns and marble benches, all for a sunken garden in her new country-place. Then we were to lunch at Sherry's, and I simply love that room there. And after luncheon she wanted me to motor out to the country-place with her, to suggest the proper setting for the dial and things. But, do you know, Al, it was the strangest thing: all the time we were at luncheon, I kept thinking of you."

His wife smiled covertly at this remarkable admission, and he continued:

"I couldn't get you out of my mind. We finished luncheon about three, and I said I must go home. She insisted on my keeping to the original plan, so at last I gave in. There was a little delay before the motor came, then we got in and started up-town. We hadn't gone five minutes, when I said to her: 'Look here, I have to go back, and that's all there is to it!' She was awfully stiff and edgy, but I made her have the chauffeur turn that car around and drive me back home. She dropped me there, and the minute I got in I saw the letter, and then I found your clothes were gone. Of course, there was only one possible place for you to go. I never even looked to see if there was a train. I

jumped into a motor and told the man to drive like Hell to the ferry, and I just caught you."

It all became clearer and clearer to Alison. Phil had been courted and flattered and petted and he had loved it — but only for its own sake. He had cared nothing for the courtier and the flatterer and the petter. He had adored the atmosphere of luxury and the evidences of wealth. She well remembered how he had basked in them at Kenneth Rawle's. He was a natural sybarite. That was all perfectly easy to understand.

Then, too, he had loved buying tapestries and pictures and art treasures, with the dealers all cringing and bowing, and Mrs. Deverall constantly appealing to his taste.

And he had loved the advertisement of it all, and the feeling that it was pushing him towards ultimate fame.

Mrs. Deverall, on her side, was a woman who must always have a man about and, having him, wanted him to make love to her. Not knowing that Phil was married, she had a perfect right to try to beguile him if she wanted to. And she might even have hoped vaguely that she would one day be the wife of the "famous author." Her own name meant nothing whatever in New York.

Well, it was all entirely plain and comprehensible. And, in addition to her relief, there were three things that gave Alison Howland distinct pleasure.

One was, that for the first time in their rather tumultuous married life, she knew that her husband had been right and that she had been wrong.

Another was, that he had wanted her back, in a hurry.

And the third was, that she had been forced to yield to his will-power. Never before had she been actually dominated by her husband. Never before had her will been conquered by his will.

And she liked the sensation!

BOOK THREE
HAVEN

CHAPTER I

ONE morning in early May, Alison Howland said to her husband:

"Phil, I want to go away to spend the day, and I want to go alone."

"Very well," he replied, "far be it from me to interfere with your plans." He was a little piqued, till he noticed a smile in her eyes.

"I have arranged your day for you. Lena will give you luncheon, and I'm going to leave you some work that will keep you busy."

She ran out of the room and returned with a big paper parcel.

"It's something I've been doing all winter," she said rather breathlessly. "I don't want you to look at it until I'm gone. I don't want to be here while you are reading it, nor to see you, nor to speak to you, till you've finished it. And to-night I want you to give me your honest opinion about it."

He looked at her curiously. She was evidently laboring under some unusual excitement, though she strove to hold it in check.

"You've written all this?" he asked. "What is it?"

"It's a story. A novel. Don't even take the wrapper off till I'm gone. I haven't the slightest idea whether the thing is any good or not. I want an outside opinion."

"When did you ever get the time to do it?"

She looked at him and laughed mischievously.

"When you were spending the winter with Mrs. Deverall," she replied.

"Oh, bosh! . . . Well, Al, I shall be delighted to read it, of course. You've got a darned good mind for a woman, but you lack experience, you know, and you won't be hurt if I criticize it pretty bluntly."

"Certainly not. I want nothing so much as a candid opinion. I have no technical knowledge, naturally, except what I have learned from my course at Columbia. In that, you'll probably have to slash me all to pieces. I realize that my lack of experience is a terrible drawback, and yet — do you know — in some ways I don't regret it."

"You don't?"

"No. Because it so sharpens impressions. Things that seem tremendous to me are simply commonplaces to more sated and seasoned observers. I believe that's the hardest thing about it: when you're fresh to impression, you're too inexperienced to record it with any degree of art; and after you've acquired your art, the edge has gone from your perception — you are less impressionable. It's another form of that wonderful French proverb, *'Si la jeunesse savait, si la viellesse pouvait!'* I think that is the saddest wisdom I ever heard."

He threw her a quick look. She had said a number of curiously striking things lately.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Out into the country somewhere. I have the *'wanderlust.'* I shall take my luncheon with me and just spend the day roaming.

I'll sit in the hedge-rows, and under the trees, and use my time wondering what you are thinking of my story. I'll wander and wonder, and I'll be back by dusk."

"You shouldn't be walking around alone, in that way."

"Nonsense," she said quickly, but she looked pleased. "I won't get out of sight of the houses. I shall be as safe as the Bank of England."

All her arrangements having been made in advance, it did not take her long to get ready. When she returned, hatted and coated, her husband was sitting with his back to her. Bending, she dropped a light kiss on the crown of his head.

"If that stuff of mine is any good," she said, "I shall expect you, hereafter, to treat me with proper respect."

"Don't I treat you with proper respect now?"

She shook her head; he couldn't tell how fast her heart was beating, how carefully she had rehearsed every move in this game that she had planned, how wildly she was hoping that not a single one might miscarry, how hard she was trying to avoid wounding his self-respect, even while she dropped the necessary hints.

"No," she said; "when I come to be a really important person, I shall expect you to rise whenever I enter the room. Good-bye, dear," and blowing him a kiss she hurried out.

She was so excited that she forgot all about taking a car. She walked rapidly, her head held high, her breath coming quickly, her eyes big and eager, and a rather wistful smile on her lips. Along the street,

bunches of daffodils, and violets, and arbutus were being offered for sale. Their perfumed breath mingled with her fancies and gave her the feeling of being a girl again, back in Coningsboro, responding with every fibre of her being to the call of the spring, and yet totally ignorant of what that call meant, or of what life held in store.

How seriously she used to take all those problems which seemed so important! How she used to worry over poor little rat-faced Joey Mengle and his home-training! Well, after all, why not? Perhaps her sense of real values had been keener then than now; perhaps she had let it get blunted.

Before she realized it, she found herself at Forty-second Street. She was a vagabond for the day; nothing called her; she could go where she pleased. She had started out with a dim idea of directing her steps towards one of the ferries; but since she was here, it made no difference. The Grand Central Station would do just as well.

Inquiry elicited the information that she had just time to catch a train up the Hudson which was leaving in ten minutes. She brought a return ticket to a point some twenty miles out and, entering the car, chose a seat on the river side and immediately fell into a brown study.

It is safe to say that of all the passengers in that car, not one was thinking and planning farther ahead than was this tall slender girl in black, with the knot of violets at her breast.

The present had fallen entirely away from her. No thoughts of meals, nor of clothes, nor of parties, nor of servants, distracted her. Nine out of every

ten of the women around her were palpitating over one or another of these subjects, while their husbands in town were wrestling with business, or bonds, or employees, or employers. None of these things disturbed Alison Howland. Every particle of her mind, every ounce of her force, every one of her hopes and fears, were centered around her great scheme.

She was about to play a long game for a big stake. If she lost, she would lose heavily; she couldn't quite visualize her future under those conditions. But if she won, she would win everything that she wanted in the world.

Alighting at her station, she wandered — simply wandered — until she was tired and hungry. Glancing at her watch, she found that it was half-past two, and she sat down to eat her luncheon under a tree.

Half-past two! Where would Phil be, by this time, in her manuscript? He read rapidly. She hoped that he wouldn't read too rapidly. There were certain bits that she didn't want him to miss. One by one, she ran them over in her own mind. She knew them all by heart. Would he like such and such a one? Would he disapprove of such another?

Suddenly, with one of those quick mental revulsions which come to every creator, she felt that her whole story was worthless. It was just ordinary trash. It had no particular merit. How could she ever have supposed that it had? And, with this thought, came the feeling that the bottom had dropped out of everything. If she couldn't write,

if her story was no good, her scheme couldn't possibly succeed.

Oh, she couldn't bear that! Succeed she must! She had worked so hard, she had tried so hard, she had prayed so hard, she had hoped so hard, that she simply could not stand failure! And it wasn't as if her plan was selfish. If she were putting all this effort into something from which she alone would benefit, it would be different. But she wasn't! She wasn't!

And so, in alternating fits of elation and depression, she spent her day, till the lengthening shadows and the sunset glow warned her that she must return and end her suspense. She craved, and yet dreaded, the verdict that awaited her.

At home, Phil's day had been scarcely less harrowing. No less, indeed, except for the fact that his mind was necessarily occupied, while his wife's was free.

As soon as Alison had gone, he had betaken himself to his study. When Lena had tapped to announce luncheon, he replied that he was too busy to come out — she might bring him a bite of food and a cup of tea. And just as dusk fell, he finished his task and sat staring into space.

The manuscript in his hands was called "The Mask." And there was no question as to its merit — Philippse Howland would have given years of his life to have been its author.

With varying emotions, he had read it. He had opened it with an interested tolerance, expecting to find about the sort of thing that one would ordinarily

find under like conditions. The first work of a writer who has lived in the world just twenty-five years, and who has known life, itself, but three of those twenty-five, is not apt to be wonderful. A prodigy writes earlier; a normal writer does his best work after longer experience: not necessarily writing-experience; just experience. For instance, as far as Phil Howland knew, his wife had never had a sentimental *tête-à-tête* with any man but him, except that one short experience with Ferriss. And, but for the one with Keppner, he was right. What he failed to understand was that to a woman of Alison's type, self-communion was the one great necessity. She could watch the enthralling drama of life and then thresh it all out with herself.

Well, anyhow, be the process what it might, this story of hers was remarkable. Not perfect, naturally, but distinctly striking. There was a breadth to it — a perception — that fairly astounded the man who read it.

So, it appeared, innocence and decency weren't necessarily limitations, after all! They might even tend to clarify vision! There was a spotlight brilliancy about some of Alison's flashes that was dazzling. She had succeeded in catching that first quick feeling that had been her own response to new experiences, and in recording it. The lack of grandiose qualities in her nature was reflected in a corresponding simplicity and directness of style. She had thought of herself not at all, of her audience not at all, of her subject exclusively and vitally.

Her viewpoint was placed at a refreshingly orig-

inal angle. Phil, himself, would have given much to possess such an outlook. Despite his beautiful style, his everlasting barrier had been lack of original ideas. He had manner, but he lacked matter, and that was his trouble.

He felt very bitter over it. It wasn't his fault that inspiration wouldn't come. Hour after hour had he chased it. It was like the old recipe for hare pie, "first catch your hare." That, unfortunately, was the one thing he couldn't do. Well would he have known how to dress it after he caught it; the trouble was to get it.

Hang it all, anyhow, why should Al have all this luck? If he were any judge of things, there would be no trouble whatever in finding a publisher for her story, and it would make a hit. And he would then be forced to appear as the husband of the successful writer. He, Philippse Howland, author of "The Inca" and of "Mountebanks." (But here he squirmed a little.)

Where under heaven had Al learned her style, and where did she get all that clean breezy clearness of perception, all that force and originality?

As a matter of fact, this need not have surprised him so greatly. Alison Howland was the exact woman to have done what she had done.

She had a natural endowment of mentality and sensibility that was far above the average. The clean habit of her training had made for vigor. Her beloved occupation of "just feeling things" had served to sensitize her mind to receive and fix impressions. Her sudden accumulation of knowledge and experience had given her a longing to ex-

press herself and to make some record of the things that so struck her. Lack of human companionship had driven her to writing. And by her conscientious study of the beautiful style which was her husband's birthright, she had formed her own manner. Why should she not be able to write a book?

Several times that day, as Phil Howland sat reading his wife's manuscript, he was assailed with a jealousy of which he was instantly ashamed. Each time he put it quickly away from him. He wouldn't be small — he wouldn't be mean. Not to Al! He couldn't go back on her after the way she'd seen him through. He'd play fair if he died for it.

The spring twilight had darkened almost to gloom when he heard the click of the front door and the sound of his wife's light step.

"Phil," she called, "where are you?"

"Here," he answered.

She came and stood framed in the doorway, one hand pressed to her breast, as she tried to see his face.

"Well?" she asked.

"Better than well," he responded, rising and going to her. "Al, you've done the trick! It's fine."

"Do you mean it?" she cried, and her voice was almost sharp in its eagerness. "Is it really good?"

Generosity of praise was not of Phil's nature, even normally; and the bitter recognition of his own deficiencies revealed by this day's work did not make it easier for him to give the tribute that was due. But he stuck loyally to his finer instincts.

"It certainly is good," he replied. His self-re-

spect rose with every word that he uttered, and each compliment came more easily than the last. "That story of yours ought to make a ten-strike," he added.

"Oh, Phil" (her voice sounded as though she were about to cry), "if it only would! You honestly think that you can find a publisher who will take it, and that it will be a success?"

"I'm sure of it. There are a few crude places that I want to go over with you. Nothing to do with the theme itself; just matters of story construction."

"Oh, yes, yes," she cried, "I want you to make all the corrections that you possibly can. Cut it and slash it as much as you please."

"There'll be mighty little of it to do," he told her. "Astonishingly little, considering that it's a first book."

They spent that evening going over the manuscript and, on the morrow, Phil took it out to be typed. He was rather nervous and irritable during the next few days, but he never went back on his resolution to help his wife to success and to begrudge her nothing.

Finally, the typewritten copy came home and was re-read and, at last, it became a question of a publisher.

"You'll take it for me?" asked Alison.

"Certainly, if you want me to."

"And to your own publishers?"

"I don't think you'd get any better ones."

"And, Phil — there's just one thing more, dear; I want it published anonymously."

She could no more fail to see the look of relief

that passed over his face than he could prevent its passing.

Nevertheless, "Why do you do that, Al?" he asked.

"I want to."

"You shouldn't. It isn't as if it were a story to be ashamed of. It's well done, and it's going to make a hit."

"Now, Phil, that story is mine, isn't it? And I have a right to do as I please? Very well! I insist that it shall be published anonymously and that not even your publishers shall know anything about the author. I want you simply to leave it with them and say that there is just one stipulation — if they decide to publish it, they must do it anonymously. And unless you are willing to do that, I shall take it myself."

"Why, I'll do it, of course, if you want me to. But I can't see your point."

However, Alison was so determined that there was no sense in further argument.

At the end of a week, Phil had a note from his publishers. He returned from the interview very much excited. They wanted the book, and they liked the idea of anonymous publication. It was good advertising. Phil had demanded a generous sum in advance royalties, and was to receive it.

"By George, Al, you've hit it," he said. "Of course, they were very careful not to be too enthusiastic; that's their business. But it was easy to see that they don't intend to let that manuscript get out of their office."

When it came to a question of signing the con-

tract, Alison insisted that her husband do it. She claimed very sensibly that if she appeared at all in the matter, the secret might leak out.

"Well, I can't for the life of me see why you should mind that," said Phil, looking at her in a puzzled way. "I don't understand you, at all. Any one would think you'd be crazy to come out in the open, instead of hiding behind me all the time."

He was growing as interested over the success of "The Mask" as though he were indeed its author. Also, although he never actually formulated the idea, there was a feeling in the back of his brain that decency leaves a better aftertaste than meanness. It is good to be able to pat yourself on the back.

Proof-reading would not begin for a month or so, and summer was upon them. They were feeling particularly affluent. Phil's five thousand from Mrs. Deverall and the advance royalties on "The Mask" made a generous addition to their income.

They decided not to spend the summer in town, nor yet in Coningsboro. And they certainly never wanted to go back to that horrible cheap suburban hotel where they had been two years ago.

"Let's go farther away than that," said Alison.

"How about Europe?" asked her husband.

For a moment, she looked radiant at the idea. But, after a little consideration, she shook her head.

"No," she said, "I think not, yet. We'll go there before long, though. But I'm not quite ready, and I shouldn't want to be rushed on my first trip abroad. I should want the pleasures of anticipa-

tion. Then there's the proof. It would be sure to make delay if all those batches of proof had to cross and re-cross the ocean. And I have set my heart on seeing that book come out in October."

They had all the delight of looking over tourist books and discussing plans. And their final decision was reached after a talk with one of Phil's actor friends. He assured them that there was only one summer resort in the world, and that was Sconset, on the island of Nantucket.

His tales of its quaintness and its many attractions appealed to both of his hearers. Alison was fascinated with the idea of an island, and lighthouses, and quaint streets with town pumps; it all sounded so picturesque and different from anything that she had ever seen, that her vote was immediately cast in favor of Sconset. And, Phil agreeing, Sconset it was for them that summer.

CHAPTER II

MR. FALLON (Phil's actor friend) may have been guilty of some exaggeration in calling Sconset "the only summer resort in the world." For that, however, we shall have to pardon him on the score of precedent. There are so many "only" places, "only" girls, "only" books, and "only" what-not, that the expression has come to be an accepted hyperbole. And, in the case of the Howlands, Mr. Fallon's assurance was entirely justified. For that particular summer, no place could possibly have suited them better.

Fallon was a star of some renown who had been engaged by Mrs. Deverall to play the part of the lover in Phil's "Inca." A strong mutual admiration had sprung up between author and actor. And at Sconset, Fallon was one of the most popular members of a colony of artists, all eager to welcome the gifted Mr. Howland to their midst. Phil was in his element, and he found the summer not only enjoyable but instructive. He picked up many a useful bit of knowledge about the technique of playwriting, in which he had always been keenly interested.

Alison, for her part, was enthralled. It was a new life; she couldn't recognize herself, and she was so seething with fresh impressions that she felt as though she would burst in trying to contain them.

She wandered around, excited, restless, stimulated. The surf, the downs, the dunes, the harbor, the town, the lighthouse, all opened new brain-worlds to her.

She used to get Phil out on the beach and make him discuss with her the various personalities in their present circle. At first this did not interest him particularly. He always said that he "took people as he found them." Some he liked, others he didn't. More often than not his feelings were influenced by their attitude towards him. But, left to himself, he would never sit down deliberately to analyze characters. He would never imagine hypothetical situations and the way that they would affect different persons. In a word, he had never been as much interested in thoughts as in the manner of their expression.

"Hang it all, Al," he said, one afternoon, as they lay stretched on the sand, watching the tumultuous surf, "you might just as well ask me how I think Fallon would look with his wife's hat on his head."

"Well, how do you think he would?" she retorted instantly. By every means, she was trying to stimulate his imagination.

"You don't mean to say that that really interests you?"

"No, I don't. That was your suggestion, not mine. But, even so, it is rather amusing. However, it is mental traits, not physical ones, that are interesting. Think of those convicts on Blackwell's Island that we saw from the boat, the day we came up here. Don't just say 'prisoners, poor devils,' and let it go at that. Think of them as men, penned

up there without space for moral breathing. Imagine them looking out on the limitless, star-studded sky, and on the free, wide water with its passing craft; strains of music from the boats would be carried to their ears, the lights would float across space to their weary eyes, and then would come their inevitable nightly return to the tiny pens to which they are doomed. Try to fancy their feelings, some bitter, some hopeless, all sad; some eager to be free in order to get even with the world; others longing for a chance to do better. Imagine the homes from which they came, the links in the chain that binds them. Isn't that tragedy for you?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. But it is so commonplace. It is just the usual convict's life."

"That, my dear boy, is just where you are wrong. It is your vision of it that is usual and commonplace and limited. The writer who can get to the intimate soul-throb of one of those convicts is the one who can produce a masterpiece of illumination. I suppose there are no new things in the world — except mechanical inventions. There certainly can be no new passions, nor desires, nor comedies, nor tragedies. They have all existed from time immemorial, modified by circumstances only. It is the point of observation, the sympathy of perception, and the force of imagination, that enable one man to portray them better than his fellows; the material is all there, it needs but the moulding hand."

Phil had pulled his hat brim far down over his eyes. His hand was idly piling the sand into heaps. For a moment he did not speak, and then he said:

"What else did you notice on that boat?"

"Oh, Phil dear, dozens of things. I could talk a month and not be talked out."

"About that one trip?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Tell me something else you noticed."

"Well, that poor pretty blonde thing, not more than nineteen or twenty, and decked like the queen of Sheba; and the horrible fat man with her. He must have been over fifty years old. She called him 'uncle' you remember, and you laughed and said that you knew all about him, and that he was no more her uncle than were you yourself, and that he had dozens of such nieces. You remember?"

"Yes. Well, what of them?"

"This. Instead of shrugging your shoulders at 'the usual game' and calling the girl a young fool and the man an old one, look at it as a life history. And a tragedy. Imagine that man, past his prime, approaching old age. Picture to yourself what that age will be, the satiety, the weariness, the burden of foul responsibility. Imagine the boyhood and youth that led to such a conception of life. And then, the poor pretty victim — whether an eager one, or an unwilling one — still a victim. As much a prisoner as any convict that lives; shut in a horrible self-made cell whose walls are constantly contracting to crush her and from which it becomes more impossible to escape with each year of her life. Think of her hours of cold loneliness; she has her gems, and her clothes, and her motors; and she must love them amazingly to have paid for them so dearly. But they cannot possibly fill her heart. She knows that she possesses nothing else — has no hope of

possessing anything else. Don't you suppose that she suffers hours of gnawing weariness and longing?"

"What makes you think about all these things, Al?"

"Think of them? How could any one help it after once knowing that they exist? We have to think, of course. Back in Coningsboro I thought of life as far as I knew it, and, even then, it seemed very wonderful to me. But now, when I see how wide the world is, how various are the souls it holds, I feel as if I could never get to the end of it all, and as if there wasn't a minute to waste. It seems to me that the great danger is the tendency to come to look upon important things as ordinary and commonplace. That is the effect of reïteration. Take the most beautiful poem in the world, for instance — if there could be such a thing possible. The first time that you read it, you will thrill in response to its every syllable. But if you hear it repeated seventeen times a day, you will presently come to listen to it without heeding its beauty. I think it is like that with life. The first great need is the power of perception. And the next thing is to keep that keen first edge on your feeling — to keep yourself fresh, as you might say. Of course, with me, the very quietness of my training assured my freshness to impression."

"There's more to it than that," said the man, "you love to think. But you want to do it on certain lines. It is people that interest you. The most wonderful piece of machinery in the world wouldn't excite you, particularly."

"Of course not. It isn't alive. It can't feel. I should try to be interested in it, but—"

"That's the precise point. You'd try. But you would have to try and probably, after all, you wouldn't succeed especially well. And you wouldn't understand it, even if some great inventor should take the trouble to explain to you all its wonderful parts."

"No, I shouldn't. I don't understand machinery at all. It seems marvellous to me that there are minds that can study the moving wheels of a machine and then know how to insert an extra cog, or screw, that will make them work in exactly the opposite direction."

"Precisely; and you are interested in those inventive minds, but not in those wheels."

"Because they are not alive."

"Yet there are persons to whom machinery is just as fascinating and just as comprehensible as are human beings to you."

"I suppose so. But it seems odd."

"Not in the least. It is because you have a distinct gift. The odd part is that you seem to think it must be universal — that every one can, and should, be as interested in human minds and human souls as you are yourself."

"I see," she said slowly; "you think it is a gift?"

"I know it is. And the things that we can do easily always seem so simple that we think any one could do them if they would only try."

"But you could do this too, Phil."

"Not as you can. After you start a subject, I enjoy threshing it out with you; but as a subject, it

certainly would never even occur to me unless you formulated it."

"That is merely initiative. You need nothing but the first push. And you enjoy this sort of talk much more than you used to?"

"Yes, I do. It's great fun."

"And your own gift is so wonderful."

"My gift? Words, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Why, that's nothing. The words are simply there, waiting to be used."

She clapped her hands.

"There you are," she cried, "belittling the thing that comes easily to you, just as you say we all do. So are ideas always there, waiting to be picked up. Take that story of mine, for instance, with its central idea of the mask. That was suggested by Mr. Keppner —"

"*Keppner?*"

"Certainly. That night when we went to Chinatown. You were there and heard everything he said. You could have picked up the thought as easily as I, if only it had interested you as much. *I* didn't make it. It was simply there. But to you it seemed commonplace and trite, while to me it was thrilling. It haunted me so that I couldn't shake it off."

"Was there ever a writer in your family?" asked her husband curiously.

"No. None that I know of."

"Or a psychologist, or a philanthropist?"

"Oh, yes! Most certainly. My father's father was quite an eminent psychologist. He was con-

sidered one of the keenest thinkers of his day. And he was a philanthropist as well."

"There it is, then. His cloak has fallen on your shoulders."

"I wonder," mused the girl. "My father has always insisted that I am like my grandfather."

"You evidently are," replied her husband. And then they fell to talking of Alison's book and of the author's proof that they were both reading every day.

At sundown they rose. Alison lingered on the wave-beaten strand.

"'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further,'" she quoted softly, "'and here shall thy proud waves be stayed.'"

"What's that?" asked her husband.

"Why, Phil! It's Scripture."

"It is? Well, do you know, it's mighty interesting language. Notice the curious use of that word 'hitherto.' We use it in relation to time; your text applies it to space; and that is evidently correct. We say 'hither and thither'; that means 'here and there,' you see. So 'hither' must mean here — 'hitherto,' 'to here.' 'To here shalt thou come, but no further.' Do you know, that's great! Have you a Bible, Al?"

"Phil! What a question! Of course I have."

"Well, I'm going to read it."

She threw back her head and laughed. She couldn't help it. Then:

"But, Phil," she said, "isn't it a wonderful thought? To see all those waves rushing in, you'd think nothing could stop them. It seems as if they

must soon inundate the entire land. And then, in obedience to their law and with no other barrier than a strip of sand, they begin to recede. It reminds me of a nation, or an individual, drunk with success. No barrier seems possible, no obstacle adequate. And then, suddenly, the limit is reached. 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.'"

In silence they turned homeward, their eyes filled with the evening beauty, their ears hearkening to the thunder of the surf, their hearts responsive to the great mystery. Alison's fingers sought and found the hand that was hanging by her husband's side; and thus, hand-in-hand like two happy children, they walked home together.

In the middle of July, Alison had a letter from Coningsboro that made her very happy. Elsa had a little daughter, and every one was rejoiced.

"I wish you could see Roscoe," wrote Mrs. Terry. "He is perfectly crazy over the baby. He says that if he sits in his office and thinks of that mite, his heart begins to beat faster. And when he is at home, he can hardly bear to have the child out of his sight. She is the prettiest *little* baby that I have ever seen, and she is named for her mother and for me. Elsa wants you to be her godmother, even if it must be done by proxy."

In spite of her great happiness for Elsa, Alison's heart was lonely and sad, and her arms ached with emptiness. She wandered alone a great deal for the next few days, and couldn't settle down to work.

And yet, there was no doubt that her own baby's death had been her husband's turning-point. Never

had there been such a bond between him and his wife, never had he considered her so much and himself so little, as since their tragedy.

How thankful she was that she had been given the wisdom to conceal Phil's involuntary agency in that tragedy — and that circumstances had made concealment possible. Public knowledge would have put Phil in a horrible position; all his life he would have been hounded by the fear that the thing was not forgotten. He would never have gone back to Coningsboro. He would never have looked his father in the face. His self-respect — so necessary to his success — would have received its death blow!

CHAPTER III

EARLY October saw the Howlands at home again in their apartment, and some ten days later came the appearance of Alison's book.

Fame is an incomprehensible thing! It would be a brave man who would attempt to analyze it, or to give an infallible formula for its capture. Only one thing about it is sure; when it comes, it comes like a thunderbolt.

A man may strive for years to overtake Fame, and strive in vain. He may never succeed, or — he may succeed over-night. He may waken some fine morning to find that he has captured it, and from that day forth, nothing that he does can fail.

And the next man may shoot his first arrow and bring down the prize with scarcely an effort.

While Alison Howland hoped for success for her first book, she was not at all prepared for what actually happened. By the time she had been back in New York two months, she was almost gasping at what had come to pass.

"The Mask" took like wildfire. Every one read it, every one recommended it to every one else, every one praised it. The first edition sold so quickly that the second had to be rushed out, and that, in turn, was exhausted almost over-night. A few days after its issue, not a copy could be raked up in the city of New York with a fine-toothed comb. Presses were

kept hot. The book headed the list of best sellers. Clergymen preached about it; the publishers were besieged with inquiries as to its authorship. Alison used to sit in dazed wonder and marvel how such things could happen.

Every day her husband would say to her: "You can't keep this thing up, Al. You will simply have to claim the authorship. It's bound to come out."

And she would answer: "It shall never come out. How can it, unless I permit it? And that I shall not do."

"But why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"I can't understand you, at all. Don't you care for the glory?"

"Not the least particle."

And in that, she spoke truly. If the years, in their passage, had taught Alison Howland anything, it was that her grandfather's creed was true: the plaudits of the crowd are valueless; every man's salvation or damnation lies in himself alone.

She looked back on those Coningsboro days when she had floated in the still waters of undisturbed ideals, and she thanked Heaven for the perpetual anchorage they would always afford her.

She remembered the maelstrom of her first married years, her first vision of life as it really was. Disillusioned, tossed about, frightened, and embittered, she believed that happiness was eternally lost to her.

But in the end, she had found her haven, and there she would rest forever in the shelter of that philosophy which had brought her peace. She knew that

neither her heights nor her depths lay in any soul save her own. Though she could not always control events, she could certainly always control their effect upon herself. She knew that ignorance was not bliss, or that it was a very false and short bliss, at the best. And she knew that innocence and ignorance were no more synonymous than were sin and knowledge. The whole world lay before her, throbbing with life and pulsing with possibilities. She might choose her path, but she could tread it but once. No step could ever be retraced. It behooved her, therefore, to keep her feet from straying. At the end of her path lay Eternity, and that too depended on her choice of direction.

Fame? A breath of air. Loneliness and heartache? But for them she would never have achieved her end. Phil's future? More momentous than fame, a thousand times over. Love? Yes, that indeed was good. It was for her to give, for her to win, for her to keep.

Success had brought the fruition of her great plan. Step by step, she retraced it in memory.

She had realized, first of all, that before she could help Phil, he must be made to believe in her. If others applauded her, he would naturally come to realize that her opinions and ideas were valuable.

Added to this was her anxiety to relieve Judge Howland of the incubus of their annual allowance. If she could make money enough to offset it, she could surely persuade Phil to forego it. That was now possible; but the unexpected furore created by her book plunged her into an even greater dilemma. It came about in this wise:

In writing "The Mask," she had consciously moulded her style upon her husband's. This resemblance was now coming to be recognized by literary specialists, and the claim was being made, with constantly increasing vigor and insistence, that Philippse Howland was the author of "The Mask." The publishers (also believing the claim) began to urge that the psychic moment for disclosure had arrived. They grew apprehensive lest it be not seized.

It was too provoking! It spoiled everything. Phil couldn't accept the plaudits without loss of all that new virility which was growing within him, and Alison had no desire to accept them. If she claimed all this sudden glory for herself, she would eclipse and irritate her husband. He would then slink in her shadow, his head would go down instead of up, and there would grow an ever-widening breach between them. She didn't want to be the successful wife of an unsuccessful husband. For that, of course, is what it means to be a woman. Of that sort of tissue are woven woman's love and woman's pride.

The thing she hoped for, the thing she prayed for, was that Phil might have an inspiration and make a new success. On this foundation had her whole scheme been based. She would foster his self-respect, she would relieve him of money pressure, she would convince him that her own powers were not despicable — that her opinion counted. She would make him think, she would coax him to write, and then she would efface herself till he had caught up with her in the race to the goal. Hand-in-hand with him would she go, or she would follow him.

But positively and unwaveringly did she refuse to precede him.

That was her plan. It was a pretty plan and a subtle one, and now the busybodies were about to ruin it all.

Alison grew fairly feverish over it. Her husband insisted that she must positively disclose her secret; she vowed with vehemence that it was the one thing which she would never do. He studied her curiously. Although it seemed to him that she must certainly be crazy on this one subject, yet he could not but be impressed by the dignity of her indifference to plaudits. Here was no preening parrot, no flaunting peacock.

It is odd that we should be so eager to convince by speech, and so forgetful of the influence of our action. Alison Howland might have talked ten years on the transiency and unimportance of public praise, and yet have failed to make the impression on her husband that she now made by her daily life — and that, without taking any thought whatever. Phil Howland had never studied any living creature as he presently came to study his wife.

"Al," he said suddenly one day, "some one ought to put you in a book."

"Put *me* in a book? Why, how ridiculous! There'd be nothing to tell about me, except that I've written a successful story. And that's a secret."

"You'd be surprised if I should tell you something that I think."

"What?"

"That your book is one of the least of your achievements, and I'm not belittling it, at that."

It was strange how much pleasure this speech of his gave her, especially when she thought it over, afterwards. At that time, she merely smiled and said:

"If any one ever put me in a book, I certainly shouldn't let him name me 'Al.'"

"Don't you like your name?"

"I love my real name. But I hate that abbreviation of it. It is ugly, and it always reminds me of Mr. Keppner."

"You never liked him, did you?"

"I admire his brain, but nothing else about him."

"It's odd how that crowd has dropped away from us. We scarcely see them any more. And, as a matter of fact, we've picked up no one else to fill their places."

"That is because we are too busy. When we have time for them, we'll soon make a circle of friends."

"Al,— excuse me, Madame,— *Alison,* I should say," (this with a grin and a mock bow) "I've wondered sometimes whether Keppner ever gave you any special reason for disliking him?"

She was silent.

"I suppose he did, the dirty beast," continued Phil.

"Yes," said Alison slowly, "he did. I longed to tell you about it but, at that time, I was absolutely sure that you would blame me. You didn't know me as well then. And as I was as innocent of responsibility as a new-born babe, I didn't care to be scolded for something I hadn't done."

Her husband moved uneasily.

"Of course you didn't," he finally remarked. "There never was a woman in the world who had less of that sort of thing about her, than you — When was it? When Keppner made himself offensive, I mean."

"It was the very day that he asked us to accept a dinner invitation. In the afternoon I was alone, and he dropped in. He was horrible, and I ran and locked myself in my room and stayed there until you came home. You remember you remarked on my red eyes. I supposed that Mr. Keppner would not dare to reënter the house for a long time — if he ever came, at all. And that very evening he returned, and I left the room as soon as possible. When you came to me with that dinner invitation, I refused it, of course. And then you thought that I was influenced by race prejudice."

Phil's eyes were lowered, and his head was supported on his hand. An unusual color had crept into his face. When he spoke, his voice was very low.

"And I was a dog," he said, "and accused you of lying. And if there is one thing you are not, it is a liar. Alison, I was a beast. Can you forgive me?"

She bent over and kissed him and then rushed from the room. She couldn't trust her voice nor her eyes.

Her slate was clean. She hadn't a secret in the world from him, as far as her own acts were concerned.

And how wonderfully it had come about! Phil took her part. He was furious at Keppner. And

three years ago, it had been just the opposite. How he had changed! How everything had changed! How happy she was!

All of this was very satisfactory, but the great problem still remained unsolved: What was to be done about the growing public certainty that Philippse Howland was the author of "The Mask"?

Although Alison got no nearer to answering this riddle, a very welcome distraction from it presently arose.

A certain dramatic star — a friend of Fallon's and an acquaintance of Phil's — wanted the book made into a play. Through the publishers the request was preferred. And by the same means of communication the answer was returned: The author of "The Mask" would be delighted to have the book dramatized, if satisfactory terms could be reached. There was but one stipulation — the work of dramatization was to be done by Mr. Philippse Howland.

This, naturally, had been Alison's idea solely; her husband had never even suggested it. But, once broached by her, he had accepted it with delight. To both of them it was immediately apparent how harmoniously their respective talents might thus be brought into conjunction. The creative ability was Alison's; the finer craftsmanship, the dramatic sense, the linguistic gift (all more mechanical than creative) were Phil's. The combination was exceptionally fortunate.

And thus began the most exciting part of all. Phil worked early and late. He was in constant

consultation with actors and stage managers. The piece was wanted for the late spring season and no time must be lost.

To Alison, the work of dramatizing the book seemed stupendous. She honestly thought it was much more remarkable than writing it. In a book, as she pointed out to Phil, you could have an unlimited number of scenes, and acts, and settings. You could describe thought, and thus prepare your sequence of events. You could explain, and argue, and convince.

But in a play, it was so different. All of the many book scenes must be compressed into three or four acts. There could be no explanations and no theorizing. Thought must be translated into speech, or depicted by facial expression and action. It seemed little short of impossible.

Phil, on the other hand, was in his element; he was made for the task, and his experience with "The Inca" stood him in good stead. His quick sense of values was unerring. He knew the exact vocabulary that each character would naturally possess; never once did the wrong word creep into his dialogue.

"Oh, she'd never say that,— never in the world," he would cry, in response to some speech suggested by manager, actor, or producer. "Don't you see, that wouldn't fit her? If she wanted to get around that, she'd do it this way." And quick as a flash, he had the proper words ready.

Then, his aptness at visualizing and his gift of appreciating pictures made an invaluable asset. "Jove, won't that make a stunning scene," he would

say again and again. He had never in his life had so congenial a task.

His writing was all done at home, and he wanted Alison always within call. Generally she sat in the study with him.

One day, when the piece was well along, he seemed unusually restless. He kept glancing up at his wife's bent head (she was sewing as she sat) and fidgeting with his desk fittings. Suddenly he rose and began to pace the room, hands rammed deep in pockets. After a few hasty turns, he stopped stock-still in front of his wife, and burst out:

"Al, I want to tell you something — I'll never rest till I get it out — I suppose you'll think I'm a damned thief, though I vow to you it didn't seem anything to me at the time — you know my 'Mountebanks'?"

She nodded, raising to him clear eyes that were filled with gentleness. He took a deep breath, and hurried on:

"Well, I got the whole idea of that thing from an old French book that I found on a bookstall on one of the Paris quais —"

"You mean that it is nothing but a translation?"

"Oh, no! The poem is mine — everything is mine except the central thought and the name."

She breathed a deep sigh of relief. He heard it, and it made his confession easier.

"It was an obscure piece of prose in old French — with the long s's, you know, and it was called '*Les Saltimbanques,*' which is an exact translation of 'Mountebanks,' of course. And the idea of it struck me tremendously. I used to think it over

as I tramped up and down the streets till, at last, the metre of the poem began to fit itself to my footsteps, and the words began to come. It was absolutely necessary for me to put them down on paper; I couldn't rest till I did it."

She nodded.

"I know all about that," she said.

"Yes. Well, when it was done, I knew it was good. I knew I'd never surpass it if I worked a lifetime. The man who wrote it had been dead for years. He'd put it in such poor form that no one had ever noticed it, and his thought was lost.— And I needed money more than I'd ever needed it in my life; honestly, I hardly knew where my next meal was to come from. So I sent the thing off to a publisher, never dreaming that it would become famous —I simply hoped that there'd be some one with enough poetry in his soul to know that it was good and to give me something for it.— And before I knew it, every one was talking about it, and my reputation was made."

"Of course," she said. "I understand."

"What could I do? I couldn't say I didn't write it. If it comes to that, I *did* write the part that they were all raving about. On your honor, Al, do you think what I did was so very bad?"

She considered a moment. She could hardly guess with what anxiety he awaited her verdict.

"No," she finally replied, "I really don't, dear. But I am quite sure you are going to be much more at ease if you make reparation."

"How?" he demanded.

"Why, I hardly know. Couldn't you prepare

a note for future editions, stating the source of the material on which your poem was based? Then you would still have the credit for your fine poetical craftsmanship — which you deserve — and yet you would avoid false credit for the original conception."

"Yes," answered her husband. He spoke slowly and very soberly. "Yes, I'll do that, Al. It's an excellent idea."

Suddenly she rose and held her face up to his. As their lips met, and his arm encircled her, she felt very happy. There was a lump in her throat, and she wanted to cry, but her heart was singing.

After some time she asked: "What about 'The Inca,' dear?"

"That, I think, is really mine. I'd always been fascinated with the picturesqueness of Peruvian history. You saw, yourself, in reading up for me, what opportunities for poetic flights the mere recital offered. Naturally, I didn't create history. But I took that last Inca and imagined him as a live man, from his youth up, and gave him a real romance. Honestly, I didn't do any conscious borrowing there."

"And it is even finer than the other," she reminded him.

Phil didn't write any more that day; but his failure to do so was immaterial, because he had already been working at such lightning speed that he could afford to idle a bit. His was a mercurial nature; he either did nothing at all, or he accomplished Herculean feats. There were no half-way measures for him.

He took Alison out to dinner and to the theatre. As they sat in the darkened house, more often than not their hands were clasped; and they felt as light-hearted as a pair of children on a holiday.

The completed dramatization of "The Mask" was such as to raise the highest hopes of success in the breasts of all those concerned. A very famous manager — Brodhead by name — undertook to put it on as soon as it could be rehearsed. An exceptionally fine cast was promised, and a backer was found in a Pittsburgh millionaire whose enthusiasm over the piece was boundless. He predicted a sensational success for it.

To Alison's surprise, she was told that it mustn't "open cold," which (being translated) meant that it mustn't be tried out in New York.

"Where will they do it?" she asked in bewilderment.

"Stamford, I believe," replied Phil.

"Stamford? That little place? But why?"

"That's the custom. It's a very dangerous experiment to open cold. They always take a piece to some smaller place within easy distance for the reporters and the theatrical men — Stamford, or Poughkeepsie, or New Haven. Atlantic City, sometimes. They've chosen Stamford for ours."

"And how long will it run there?"

"Oh, only three performances — a matinée and two evenings."

"Then how long before they can bring it to New York?"

"If it is the success that they hope, they'll have

it here within ten days. They're planning to switch another piece and get a theatre in that way. I'm going to run up with the boys to the Stamford production. But unless you are especially eager to go, I think you'd better wait for the New York first night."

"Oh, yes, I'd rather. But you'll wire me from Stamford?"

"Well, I should rather think so! The moment I know how it is going, I'll send you word."

The day of the Stamford try-out, they were so nervous they could settle to nothing. It was a mere toss which of them would say to the other: "Oh, do you think it will go? Do you think they'll like it?"

But, whichever said it, the other would invariably reply: "Of course it will go. It can't fail. They liked the book, and they'll like the play."

Between them now, there was no choice when it came to a question of self-reliance. Neither of them was the prop, neither the clinging vine. They hung together for better for worse, alike in their hopes, alike in their fears, each seeking and receiving support and encouragement from the other.

After Phil left the house, there was no task to which Alison could force herself. She couldn't read, she couldn't write, she couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep. She was afraid to go out, because of the expected telegram.

At last it came. Almost before the bell had ceased tinkling, she was at the door. With trembling fingers she tore open the yellow envelope and read the message:

"Top-notch success. Every one crazy with delight. Home to-morrow.

"P."

She leaned against the wall, and her breath came quick and fast. Then, with the tears raining down her cheeks, she sent up a prayer of thanks for the good fortune that had come to them.

Phil's return confirmed every hope they had nursed. The piece would open in New York in ten days; that would be Monday night, April twenty-eighth — almost a year from the day when he had first read his wife's manuscript.

Accordingly, many letters were written. The dear ones back home were all urged to come to New York for that marvellous first night. They were merely told that Phil had written a wonderful dramatization of "The Mask," and that a great success was prophesied for the piece.

Even in quiet Coningsboro had the book made a furore. Mr. Terry had mentioned it in the pulpit and had urged his congregation to read what he had called, "the strongest combination of philosophy, unquestioning faith, and orthodox belief, that literature has offered in many a day." Judge Howland, who never read novels, had read this one and, rather to his disappointment, had found no flaw to pick in it. It suited Coningsboro ideals even while it stabbed Coningsboro complacency and self-sufficiency. With bated breath and feverish interest had the villagers read it.

Elsa and Roscoe were the only ones in the home-circle who could not accept the invitation to New

York. They were sorry but not heartbroken. Their horizon was rather completely bounded, at present, by a young lady not quite ten months old.

Mr. and Mrs. Terry, Judge Howland, and Gertrude and Kenneth Rawle all wrote that they would be delighted to come on. As the opening night would be Monday, and as the Terrys objected to Sunday travel and had, moreover, to attend their Sunday services, the entire party was to leave Coningsboro early on Monday morning and reach New York about four in the afternoon. Alison and Phil would meet them and take them to their hotel, where Gertrude and her mother would then have a couple of hours for rest.

Rawle wanted them all, including the Howlands, to be his guests at dinner preceding the play. But Alison and Phil begged off on the plea of excitement. They would meet the balance of the party at the theatre.

CHAPTER IV

ALISON HOWLAND and her husband never forgot that April night. They pretended to dine at home, in the spring twilight, but the amount of food they managed to swallow was not very great.

Alison had a new frock for the affair — Phil had insisted on that — and he surveyed her with intense pride after helping her into its intricacies.

"By Jove, Alison," he said, "you're the best-looking woman I ever saw. You're so different-looking."

She colored with pleasure at his words.

"You are not especially bad-looking yourself," she told him.

In sooth, Phil Howland was a man transformed. His stooping slouch was gone, and he held himself erect. The hangdog look had given place to an air of confidence, and his hectic egotism and aggressiveness had melted into something that was nothing more than respectable self-reliance. His regular life had taken the edge off his nerves, and his whole manner bore the buoyant stamp of success.

They drove up to the theatre in a hansom, that being Alison's favorite conveyance. As they approached the entrance, she saw the words "The Mask" thrown in huge letters of flame against the pale crepuscular April sky, and she felt as though the beating of her own heart would suffocate her.

They were the first of their party to arrive, but it wasn't many minutes before they were greeting the others — all very happy and very complimentary about Phil's importance.

"I never sat in the box with a playwright before," smiled Gertrude. "Don't you feel proud to belong to him, Allie darling?"

It was a rather superfluous question. Alison's pride in her husband was written all over her.

The best seats were forced upon the three parents. Gertrude and Kenneth took the next best with many protestations; but Alison insisted that nothing would induce her to sit anywhere but in the background, and they all understood that Phil would want to be moving around a bit.

By eight o'clock the house was crowded, and the "Standing Room Only" sign was displayed on the sidewalk; inside, the curtain rolled smoothly up, and the performance began.

There was no question about its success. From start to finish, the applause was constant and thunderous. Even Phil was satisfied. Alison heard him mutter under his breath, "Thank God, it's all right!" and then give a long tremulous sigh of relief. Her hand sought and met his, and there, with tightly interlocked fingers, they sat and watched their mutual success.

There were curtain calls, and responses from the star, and bows of appreciation from the entire company; but even that wasn't enough. At the conclusion of the piece, somewhere in the house, the cry of "Author" was started; and in a moment, every unit in that vast audience had caught it up.

"Author! Author!" they thundered, till it was like Bedlam itself.

Presently came the manager, seeking Phil. Phil frowned and shook his head. But there was no choice; nothing less than the appearance of the "author" could possibly still that clamor. Alison turned to her husband to insist. Her eyes were wet with tears.

"You must go, Phil; you must. Nothing else will satisfy them."

He drew her out into the corridor with him, and then he spoke.

"Not I," he said, "you."

"I? You're crazy. It is the play they are applauding, not the book. You wrote the play. Go on out, dear, and tell them so. They'll never stop till you do."

Mr. Brodhead was called and instructed. Presently, he appeared on the stage and managed to get a hearing.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "neither I nor the publisher is in the least aware of the identity of the anonymous author of that successful novel 'The Mask.' But the playwright, Mr. Philippse Howland, is here and will be very happy to respond to your call, and to receive your congratulations on his successful work."

While he was speaking, Phil had been saying hurriedly to Alison: "I want you to let me tell them. There is no sense in further secrecy. Let us take our happiness together. Let me tell them. May I?"

"Oh, I don't know," she faltered. "I'm afraid

of deciding too quickly. I'm afraid of making a mistake."

"I ask it as a favor," he whispered, as he hurried away. "I'll watch you for a sign. Don't fail me." And he was gone.

At his appearance on the stage, the house went mad again; and then he raised his hand, and the silence was immediate and intense.

"Dear people," he said, "I cannot begin to thank you adequately; there is no use in trying. But if it is true that the way to be happy is to give happiness, then every soul of you here to-night should be steeped in bliss.

"It is kindness of this sort that makes work sweet. It is appreciation of this sort that spurs a man to further effort. If ever I write a better play than this, it will be because there is no other way of expressing my gratitude to you for to-night's success.

"There are two sides to success — the side of the man who makes the effort and the side of those who appreciate it and put it on its feet. Neither side can go far without the other. So, you see, I owe you quite as much to-night as you can possibly owe me.

"With all my heart I thank you! I thank the ladies and gentlemen who have insured the success of the piece by their skilful portrayal of its various characters. I thank the manager, who has been known to you too long and too well to necessitate compliments on my part. And to my thanks, I add my grateful acceptance of that part of your appreciation to which I have a right — the part which applies to the work of dramatization.

"But, as I am sure you all know, the play is

written around the novel of the same name which made such a hit this past winter. That novel, in spite of repeated reports to the contrary, I did not write. From the first, however, I have been in the confidence of its anonymous author; but never, until I sat watching this play with you to-night, did I realize with what sweet, lovable, and wise motives had that anonymity been assumed."

While he had been speaking, Alison's eyes had never left his face. She sat as if spellbound, following his every word, unconscious of all else in the world. Just before he mentioned the secret authorship of the book, he threw her a quick glance. In answer, and almost like a person hypnotized, she responded with a nod. A smile lighted his face, and he continued:

"I am about to doff a mask of my own. The best way of proving my gratitude to you is to share with you my guilty secret. Also, it is the surest means of convincing you that I am sincere in disclaiming credit for the book. Ladies and gentleman, the author of 'The Mask' is my wife. It will give her intense pleasure to help me receive your more than kind congratulations."

He stepped quickly over to the rail of the box and held out his hand. Like a woman in a trance, Alison rose in response to his summons. She saw nothing else, realized nothing else, but just that Phil was waiting for her. The startled exclamations of the rest of the box-party fell on deaf ears, their looks of incredulous happiness on blind eyes. By instinct she found her way to the front of the box. She reached out her hand and took Phil's, her eyes

dewy, her lips parted, her breast rising and falling tumultuously.

There they stood together while thunderous bursts of applause rolled up to them from that sea of clapping hands and human throats. Wave after wave collected, broke, and gave place to its successor. It seemed as if it would never end.

At last it was over, and the satisfied audience began to disperse. And then came the more intimate congratulations.

Mr. Terry was experiencing what was probably the proudest moment of his life. Mrs. Terry was crying openly. Gertrude and Ken were aquiver with happy felicitations and surprised questions. And old Judge Howland kept swallowing something in his throat and repeating "My boy and my girl; my boy and my girl," in a voice that was suspiciously husky.

They were getting into their wraps — Phil and Alison acting very much like a pair of sleepwalkers — seeking armholes, missing them, forgetting them, and then awaking anew to the necessity for finding them — when along came the manager with an invitation. The entire party must join him and the principals and the producer in a theatre supper of jubilation.

He interrupted his own invitation to add his especial laurels to Alison's rapidly accumulating heap, and then urged anew.

Alison would honestly rather have gone home; but she saw that it would not only be ungracious, but that it would be a disappointment to the rest of her party, so she yielded at once.

Mr. and Mrs. Terry, though anxious to go, were inwardly experiencing some little trepidation. The Rawles, Judge Howland, and Phil were frankly eager.

"Where are we going?" asked Alison.

"To a Hungarian restaurant down town, if you will. There'll be Italian cooking, and delicious native wine, and the most interesting crowd you'll find in New York. Carriages will be at the stage entrance in a few moments."

The Terrys and Rawles were honored by being placed in the first carriage — a little to the disappointment of the latter pair. Judge Howland insisted on going with "his girl," so he and Alison and Mr. Westcott (the producer) got into the second carriage, while Phil, together with Brodhead and the two principals, followed in the third. The rest of the party paired off according to personal preference.

Alison and her happy father-in-law sat side by side, while the equally happy Mr. Westcott faced them. He fairly radiated delight.

"And it was you who wrote that clever book, Mrs. Howland?" he asked. "How proud you must feel!"

"More thankful than proud," she smiled.

"Wasn't it a frightfully difficult feat?"

"Difficult? Oh, no! I think it would have been much harder *not* to write it than to write it, after I once began to think about things."

At this, Judge Howland gave a snort of pleasure.

"The true fountain of inspiration," laughed Westcott, "impossible to dam!"

Alison tactfully turned the talk away from herself.

"What a hit the play made," she began. Her companion almost took the words out of her mouth.

"By George, didn't it, though?" he cried. "Wonderful! Simply wonderful!"

"Where did you sit, sir?" asked Judge Howland. "In a box?"

"Oh, no, indeed! Brodhead and I were at the back, and moved about constantly in order to take the pulse of the audience. Then, we had men planted all over the house. . . ."

"Not to applaud?" said Alison, rather fearfully.

"Heavens, no," he laughed. "Simply to watch the audience and to see whether the thing got over. And there was no question about it. It is the hit of the year. You and your husband must give us many more such pieces, Mrs. Howland! How happy you must be to be able to work hand-in-hand, as it were."

Arrived at the restaurant, they entered a long room filled with tables around which parties were rapidly collecting. On a raised platform, at one end, the orchestra was stationed. At first, the musicians followed their own programme, but as the evening progressed, they repeatedly responded to calls from the audience, giving any selection that was demanded.

In the center of each table was a cask with a spiggot. From this was drawn the sparkling, pink, Hungarian wine.

Brodhead's party attracted immediate attention. The host and those of his guests who were profes-

sionals were already well-known, and the balance of the party looked sufficiently interesting to warrant frequent glances and inquiries.

Nothing was formal. Intimates wandered from table to table. Every one who approached Brodhead's table either asked about the reception of the new piece or offered felicitations on the success they had already heard reported. The newcomers were invariably presented to Phil and Alison, and congratulations were incessant and cordial.

Gertrude, watching her sister, began to realize that there might be something bigger in the world than perfect contentment. Alison had built, she had achieved, she had created. That meant power and influence and, perhaps, even a name that would outlive her. What opportunities were hers! What vistas opened before her! She had done something that had made the world take notice. She had outstripped them all.

Gertrude, herself, was the recipient of no small share of admiration; her beauty and her charm assured her of that. But the real glory of the evening belonged to those who had made its success.

Mr. and Mrs. Terry, having gone a little fearfully, were distinctly surprised. Except that the conversation was more sparkling, they might have been at a supper-party of their own intimates. Nowhere in the room was there anything to wound their sensibilities.

Although repeated attempts were made to lead the conversation into other channels, it always came back to "The Mask." Small wonder, either, considering the reception the piece had had.

"The most remarkable thing of all," said Brodhead, "was that the big punch came in that quiet second act. We expected one, of course, in the third act, and we got it. But it was a regular triumph to get that second act across the way we did."

"That was your favorite, Alison," said Phil, nodding to his wife.

"It was?" queried Brodhead eagerly. "You picked that scene, Mrs. Howland? Why?"

"I thought it wonderful because of its very quiet and its restraint," she replied. "The next scene was carried by action — this by mere mental force. Its success to-night," she added graciously, "was due, of course, to the acting of Miss Mardon and Mr. Sharrow"—

"And to Mr. Howland's lines," Miss Mardon interposed quickly.

And so it went. The graceful ball of compliment was caught by one of them, only to be tossed by him to another. But always the book and the play were the great themes of the conversation; and always, even among these professionals, Alison was singled out for admiration. A woman who at one fell blow had set the world agog, who had jumped into fame with scarcely an effort, was not a woman to disregard.

As they talked, a commotion in the front of the room caught their attention. A famous Italian tenor had just entered. He was pointed out to Brodhead's party just as he blew a kiss to Miss Mardon.

Later, singers rose in their various places and sang delightfully. Some even walked on to the

platform to oblige their listening audience. There was applause and badinage and intimate dialogue.

The Coningsboro guests scarcely knew themselves. It was a different world from any that they had ever glimpsed. Even Ken, that incomparable worldling, was fairly new to it.

It was late when they all separated. After repeated good nights, Phil and Alison got into a cab alone and drove homeward.

They talked but little as they sped through the lamplit night. Their hearts and brains were too full for talk. They were glad to lean back in the semi-gloom and give themselves up to happy retrospect.

How wonderful it all was, thought Alison, how marvellous! Even yet, she could scarcely grasp it! By far the greatest miracle of all, from her point of view — greater than fame, greater than money — was the present relationship between her and her husband. How distant seemed now the unhappiness, the disagreements, the misunderstandings. Why, only one short year ago, she had been on the point of leaving him — had, indeed, actually left him. She shivered as she realized the abyss her feet had skirted.

But now that it was all over, she realized fully that the things that had seemed so horrible at the time had actually been the leading-strings of her happiness.

Without loneliness, she would never have turned to writing.

Without suffering, she could never have comprehended.

Without their tragedy, never would that first tender mutual bond have sprung up between her and Phil.

And without her, Phil would never have succeeded. In all humility and in all thankfulness she admitted it, for she knew that it was true.

But for her, Phil would have taken a girl from the circle around him and have sunk constantly lower; or he would have married some other delicately reared woman of Alison's own class, and the result would have been separation. By exactly those inborn traits that differentiated her from other women, had she been able to save him from himself. And she thanked Heaven for granting her the opportunity, the ability, and the wisdom.

How more than worthy he was of salvation! There was sweetness in him, there was responsiveness, there was brilliancy. It needed but the firm and patient hand of a good woman to keep him from the gutter.

Then Alison thought of Phil's father. She had been enabled to justify his affection. She had given him a son of whom he might be proud forever. And to Judge Howland, pride was the breath of life. A certain intuition told Alison that the old man's special happiness, that night, had been caused by his son's repudiation of that share of the praise which was not his right. Suddenly a flash of wonder assailed her; Judge Howland had always been an inveterate bookworm; had he, by any chance, long known of the secret source of Phil's "Mountebanks"?

Well, even if he had, atonement had now been

made. His pride in his son was firmly established.

There came into the girl's mind an old couplet that her mother used to quote:

> The clouds we most do dread,
> Are rich with blessing, and will break
> In fullness on our head.

In fullness on her head, had her own dread clouds indeed broken.

As she sat dreaming, they found themselves at their own door.

Once inside the apartment, their tongues were loosed. In spite of the lateness of the hour, they sat down and began to plan for the happy future that lay before them.

They would work, of course; work together. That was the foundation on which their entire edifice was to be built.

Besides working, they would travel together. "I'll show you Europe," promised Phil, "and all the places I know. And then we'll discover new ones together."

"Oh, Phil," she cried, "it's come at last! The thing I've longed for all my life! It seems too good to be true."

"Everything seems a bit that way," he laughed. "Let's always keep this little flat for town use, Alison. We'll need a foothold in town and, merely for what we've been through here together, I'd hate to give it up."

"Give it up?" she interrupted quickly. "Of course we won't give it up. Why should we?"

"We won't, as I'm telling you. We'll keep it,

but not for a permanent home. Because you're going to have that real home that you've always longed for; the sweetest little home in the country that you ever saw."

"Oh, no, Phil. You mustn't. You'd hate it."

"Hate it? I'd love it. I can hardly wait to find it."

"Not really, dear? Isn't it just to please me?"

"It's to please myself by pleasing you. Please God, you are not going to have the sole option on unselfishness in this household in the years to come."

"What about snowstorms?"

"I shall probably discover that they are as beautiful as mud beds."

"What about furnaces?"

"If I can't make money enough to hire a furnace man, I'll find my own proper level as a stoker."

He rose and, going over to her, dropped to his knees by her side and buried his head in her lap.

"Oh, Alison," he said, "when I think what a trump you've been, how you've stood by me and seen me through, there aren't words to tell you how I feel about it. You've made me, that's what you've done — made me, body and soul."

"No, Phil, I've done nothing but tried to get you a fair chance. That was all that you needed. You never had it before."

"Well, I've had it now. And may I live to make good! And the first thing I do with it is to see that you have a fair chance yourself."

As he talked, his wife's busy mind flew off to plans for this happy future that he promised her. She could see him in the new surroundings. It was

inevitable that his artistic nature should blossom more luxuriantly in a setting that was less bleak and bare; with coming prosperity she could imagine him busy and interested — cynicism, socialism, Bohemianism, all forgotten and outgrown. He would be proud of his home, proud of his wife, proud of his . . .

"Do you hear what I am saying, Alison," her husband's voice interrupted, "or are you dreaming?"

"I was dreaming, I think. What did you say, dear?"

"I said that you must have something more worthy of your petting than I have been. My dear, if ever there was a woman born to be a magnificent mother of sons — and of daughters — that woman is you."

"Oh, Phil, Phil," she cried, and the tears were raining down her cheeks, "that is that I long for, dear. It is all that I lack."

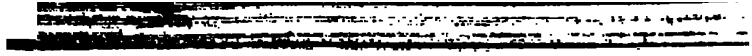
No more lonely hours! No more arms aching from emptiness! But, instead, little feet to patter, little bodies to care for, little brains to train, little lips to kiss.

As they sat there in blissful silence, there suddenly rang in Alison Howland's brain words that she had not heard for years. They were as distinct as though actually intoned by her father's tender voice:

"A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world."

In truth, Alison Howland remembered no more her anguish, " for joy that a man was born into the world! "

THE END



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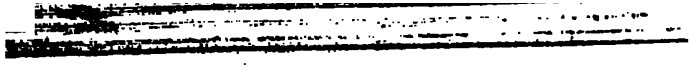
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